The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation

by Vern Sheridan Poythress

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Acknowledgments

The substance of this book is an expansion of study notes that I originally wrote for the New Geneva Study Bible (Nashville: Nelson, 1995). I am grateful to the Foundation for Reformation for permission to use my notes in expanded and altered form in this book, as a further aid to Christians who wish to appropriate the truths of the Word of God for themselves.

I wrote the bulk of this book before having in hand G. K. Beale's book, The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). I now find to my delight that Beale's approach is very similar to mine. He has provided the world with an outstanding technical commentary largely complementary to the practical focus in this book. Readers looking for more complete information and more thorough discussion may consult his commentary.

This book is dedicated to my wife Diane, who has faithfully encouraged me to go forward with my writing and given me many useful suggestions on how I may help us all "take to heart what is written in it" (1:3).

Introduction

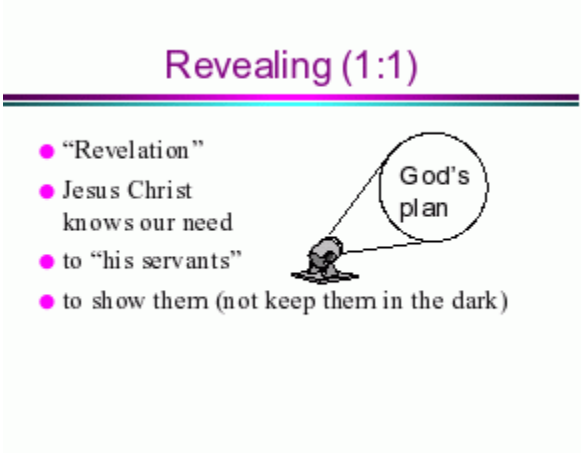
Can We Understand Revelation?

Can you understand the Book of Revelation? Yes, you can. You can summarize its message in one sentence: God rules history and will bring it to its consummation in Christ. Read it with this main point in mind, and you will understand. You will not necessarily understand every detail—neither do I. But it is not necessary to understand every detail in order to profit spiritually.

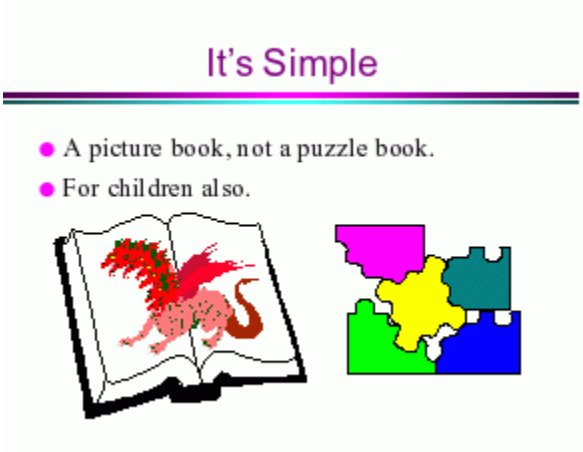
The same is true of all Scripture. Scripture is inexhaustibly rich, so that we never plumb all its depths and mysteries. But the main points are clear, so that we know what to believe and how to act (Prov. 1:1-7; Ps. 19:7-13). 2 Timothy 3:16-17 tells us not only that all Scripture is inspired, but "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." All Scripture, including Revelation, has practical value for exhortation, comfort, and training in righteousness. Paul underlines the point in 2 Timothy 4:1-5 by drawing a contrast between solid teaching of the gospel message and people's desire to have "teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (4:3). God gave us Revelation not to tickle our fancy, but to strengthen our hearts.

The Clarity of Revelation

Revelation itself makes the same point in the first few verses, 1:1-3. It is "the revelation of Jesus Christ." The word revelation, or unveiling, indicates that it discloses rather than conceals its message. This revelation comes in order "to show his servants … ." The word show again implies that it can bring its message home to hearers. Revelation addresses itself to "his servants." Not just prophecy buffs, not Ph.D.'s, not experts, not angels, but you. If you are a follower of Christ, this book is for you and you can understand it. The third verse says, "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who heart it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near." God knew that some of his servants would hesitate over this book. So he gives extra encouragement to our reading by pronouncing an explicit blessing. Revelation is the only book in the whole Bible with a blessing pronounced for reading it!1 But the reading should not be an empty or rote reading, as the continuation makes clear: "take to heart what is written in it." Revelation should not merely flit through our brain, or lead to vain speculations, but lodge in our heart and work a practical response, a response of "keeping" it, just as we are to keep Christ's commandments by obeying them. (The word tereo translated "take to heart" is used in the Gospel of John for "keeping" Christ's commandments.)



Can We Understand?



If Revelation is clear, why do so many people have trouble with it? And why is it so controversial? We have trouble because we approach it from the wrong end. Suppose I start by asking, "what do the bear's feet in Revelation 13:2 stand for?" If I start with a detail, and ignore the big picture, I am asking for trouble. God is at the center of Revelation (Rev. 4-5). We must start with him and with the contrasts between him and his satanic opponents. If instead we try right away to puzzle out details, it is as if we tried to use a knife by grasping it by the blade instead of the handle. We are starting at the wrong end. Revelation is a picture book, not a puzzle book. Don't try to puzzle it out. Don't become preoccupied by isolated details. Rather, become engrossed in the story. Praise the Lord. Cheer for the saints. Detest the Beast. Long for the final victory.

The truth is, some teachers of the Book of Revelation have set a bad example. They turn the Book on its head; they turn it into a puzzle book. In their example they preach obscurity instead of clarity, and of course people end up feeling incompetent.

"I'm confused." "It's so complicated." "I'm lost." "It's all a puzzle, and only this expert teacher can make sense of it." "I give up."

But some few refuse to give up. Instead, they develop an unhealthy interest. They search for some complicated new scheme of their own to try to "solve" the puzzle. They end up tickling the fancy, and missing the real point.

In contrast, people uninfluenced by super-duper teachers do better.

One time as I was teaching Revelation, I noticed many children in the congregation.

"I want you children to read Revelation too. If you are too young to read it for yourself, have your parents read it to you. You too can understand it. In fact, you may understand it better than your parents."

A boy about 12 years old came up to me afterwards. "I know exactly what you mean. A short time ago I read Revelation, and I felt that I understood it."

"Praise the Lord!"

"I read it just like a fantasy, except that I knew it was true."

I thought, “Precisely.”

This story was so good that I began using it when I taught Revelation in seminary classes. A student came up afterward.

“You know that 12-year-old boy?”

“Yes.”

“I know exactly what he meant. I can remember reading Revelation when I was about 12 years old, and understanding it. I have been understanding it less and less ever since!”

A group of seminary students finished playing basketball in a gym. They noticed the janitor in a corner, reading a book.

“What are you reading?”

“The Bible.”

“What part of the Bible?”

“Revelation.”

We’ll help this poor soul, they thought. “Do you understand what you are reading?”

“Yes!”

They were astonished. “What does it mean?”

“Jesus is gonna win!”

A charismatic pastor was praying in his study. “What should I preach on next?”

“Revelation.”

“Great! I’ll get out my seminary notes, dig in, whip up some diagrams, and show my stuff.”

“No.”

“What do you mean? What am I supposed to do?”

“Read it.”

Pause. “That’s crazy. I can’t just stand up there and read it. Isn’t a pastor supposed to teach? What good will I do?”

“Do it.”

(Reluctantly) “O.K.”

That congregation had the experience of a lifetime. The pastor dutifully read a paragraph. Then came responses. Prayers. Songs. Praises. Spontaneous exhortations. Repentance for compromises with the world. More praise. Then another paragraph, and so on through the book. The congregation found that, taught by the Spirit of Christ, they did know how to understand! On the other hand, if the

pastor had got out those seminary notes and lectured, the congregation might have sunk into a puzzle-book mentality.

If you are leading a group in studying Revelation, do not become "the expert" in a bad sense. Yes, we can receive help concerning the details by utilizing scholarly resources. And, yes, you can help people over some things that seem mysterious to a modern reader. But do it in a context where ordinary people can experience the Book first-hand, and follow its powerful drama for themselves, engaging their own hearts in the pictures.

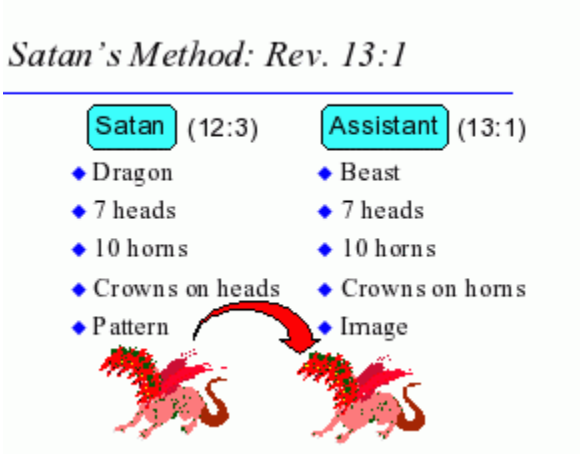
Confidence in God
Don't be the "expert."
You can't possibly understand without my help!
You're right. I give up.
Encourage.
Look at God's greatness!

Counterfeiting

We can illustrate how to understand Revelation by starting with one of its most important themes, the theme of spiritual warfare. Satan, the leader of the forces of evil, fights against God and the angels and God's people, but is ultimately defeated by the Victor, Jesus Christ.

Consider the picture in Rev. 13:1:

And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name.

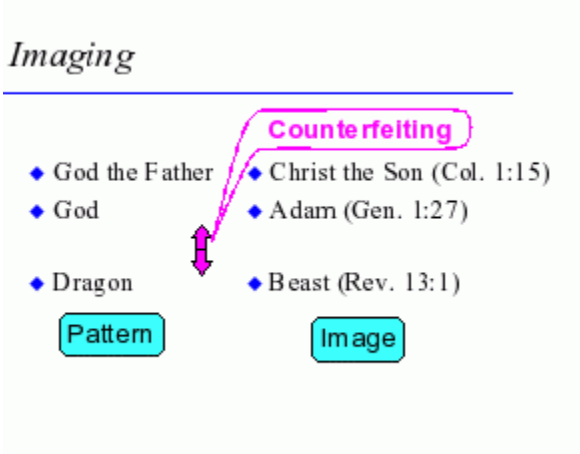


A strange vision! But it is not quite so strange if we have already read about the Dragon in Rev. 12:3. The Dragon is a frightful monster. The Beast of Revelation 13:1-8 is likewise a monster. The Dragon

has seven heads. The Beast likewise has seven heads. The Dragon has ten horns. So does the Beast. The Dragon has crowns on his heads. The Beast has crowns on his horns. What is going on here?

The Beast is strikingly like the Dragon. In fact, he is an image of the Dragon. The Dragon stands on the shore of the sea, in a way that is reminiscent of the Spirit of God hovering over the waters in Gen. 1:2. And then there comes forth his "creation," the Beast, made in the image of the Dragon.

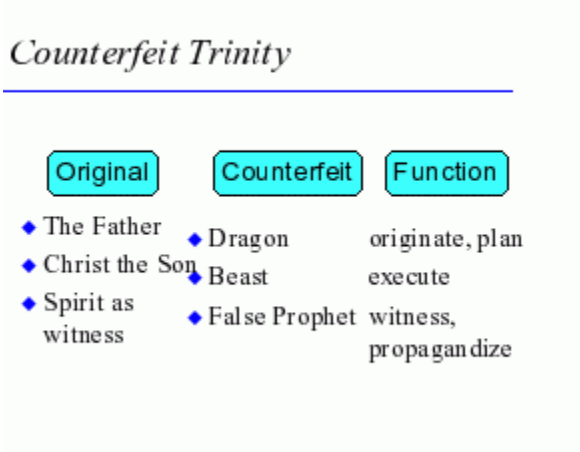
Have we seen something like this process before? Of course we have. "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him" (Gen. 1:27). The Dragon is a picture of Satan (Rev. 12:9). What Satan does in Rev. 13:1 imitates what God did according to Gen. 1:27. But what sort of imitation does Satan produce? It is not genuine but counterfeit.



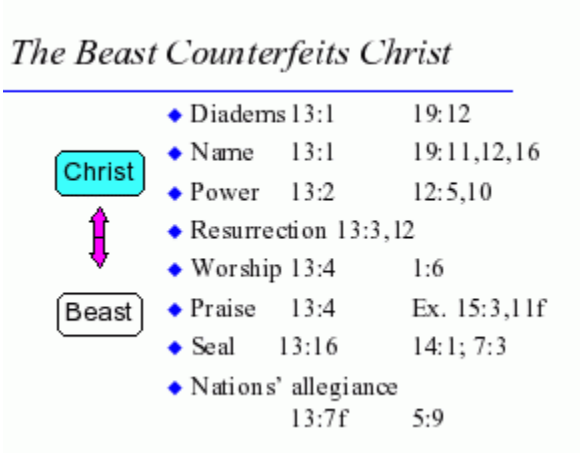
Originally, God used imitation is a positive way. Man as an image reflected and displayed the character of God. In fact, imaging did not start with man! According to Col. 1:15, even before creation the divine Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, was the image of God: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created; ... ." The creation of man in God's image imitates the imaging relation between God the Father and the Son.

Now Satan is a counterfeiter. He counterfeits God the Father by producing a counterfeit "son," the Beast. The Beast is clearly the counterfeit of Christ the Son. Satan aspires to be God and to control everything for himself. He has a plan, analogous to the Father's plan. He will work out this plan through his executor, the Beast.

Is there then a counterfeit of the Holy Spirit as well? There is, in Rev. 13:11-18. Another beast comes out of the earth (13:11). This beast is later identified as the "false prophet" (Rev. 16:13). This False Prophet works "miraculous signs" (13:13), reminiscent of the miraculous signs worked through the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts. Through miraculous signs the Holy Spirit draws people to worship Christ. Analogously, the False Prophet promotes worship of the Beast (13:12). As "another Counselor" the Holy Spirit has the authority of Christ (John 14:16, 18). The False Prophet "exercises all the authority of the first beast on his behalf" (Rev. 13:12). The Holy Spirit guides us into the truth (John 16:13). The False Prophet deceives (Rev. 13:14).



Satan, the Beast, and the False Prophet therefore form a kind of counterfeit trinity. They are shown linked together as a threesome when they organize people for the final battle (Rev. 16:13).



The counterfeiting can be demonstrated most impressively when we look at the Beast. The Beast has ten crowns on his horns (13:1). In Rev. 19:12 Christ has "many crowns" on his head. The Beast has "blasphemous names" (13:1). Christ has worthy names (19:12, 13, 16). The Beast has great power (13:2). Christ has divine power and authority (12:5, 10).

The Beast experiences a counterfeit resurrection. It seemed to have "a fatal wound," but the wound was healed (13:3). The counterfeit character of the Beast is clear in this feature. The Beast did not actually die and come to life again. He did not experience an actual resurrection. But he had a wound that one would think should have led to his death. His recovery was marvelous and astonishing, so astonishing that it was a big factor in leading people to follow him. Just as the resurrection of Christ is the chief event that astonishes people and draws them to follow Christ (John 12:32), so here this counterfeit miracle, a counterfeit resurrection, leads to following the Beast.

The Beast receives worship (13:4); Christ receives worship (5:8-10). The worshipers offer a song of praise to the Beast, "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?" (13:4). This song blasphemously counterfeits the song offered to God at the exodus, "Who among the gods is like

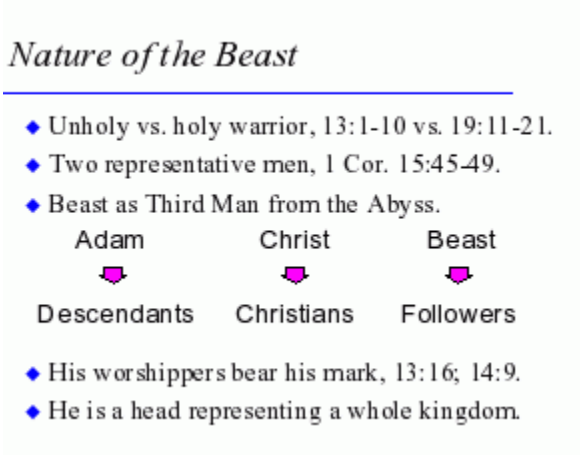
you, O Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?" (Exod. 15:11).

The Beast has a seal that is put on his followers (13:16). In parallel fashion Christ seals his followers with the seal of his name on their foreheads (14:1). At the last day people from all nations will worship Christ (5:9), and he will exercise his authority over all. Meanwhile, the Beast "was given authority over every tribe, people, language, and nation" (13:7).

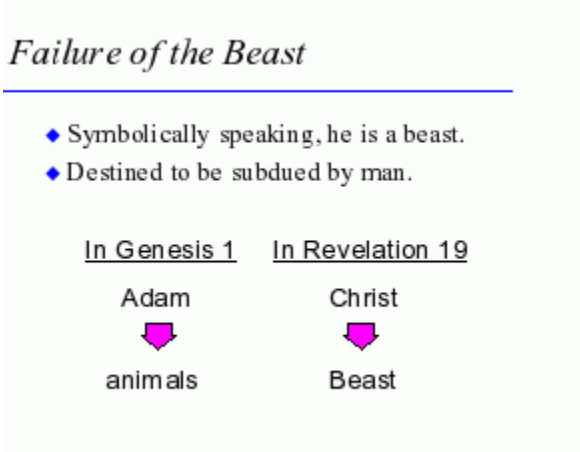
The climactic confrontation between Christ and the Beast occurs in Rev. 19:11-21. Christ appears on a white horse, going out to war against God's enemies. The Beast appears as the chief opponent, who heads up the kings of the earth (19:19). The chief result of the battle is that the Beast and his assistant, the False Prophet, are defeated and consigned to the fiery lake (19:20).

In this scene, Christ is the divine warrior.2 He fulfills the Old Testament prophecies that speak of God appearing to fight against the enemies (Zech. 14:1-5; 9:13-16; Isa. 59:16-18; Hab. 3:11-15). Christ is the holy warrior, who judges with justice (Rev. 19:11). The Beast, we infer, is the demonic counterfeit, the unholy warrior from the demonic region of the abyss. As Christ is the head of the holy army, the Beast is the head of the unholy army.

The picture of heading up a whole realm of followers recalls the idea of "federal" headship, that is, covenantal headship, expounded in 1 Cor. 15:45-49. According to 1 Corinthians 15, there are two "Adams," the first Adam and the last Adam. The first man Adam, made from dust, is the pattern for all human beings descended from him. We too have bodies of dust, belonging to the earth. The last Adam, Christ, is the second man from heaven. He is the pattern for all human beings united to him, that is, all those under his federal headship. "Just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven" (1 Cor. 15:49).

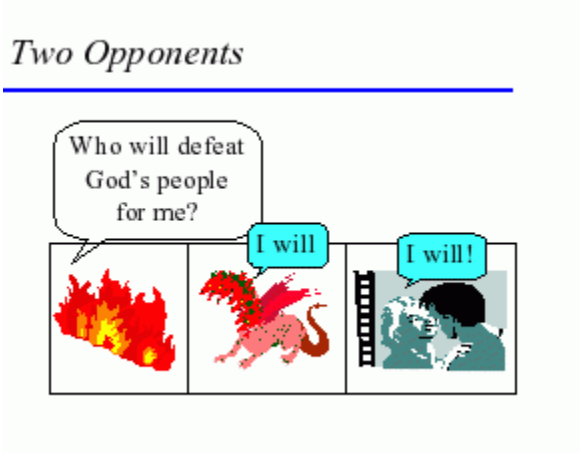


The Beast aspires to head up all nations (13:7-8). As a counterfeit of Christ, he aspires to be another federal head! He would be a third man, from the abyss. The seal of his ownership in 13:16 then proclaims that his followers will be like him.



But now note well. He is a beast, a hideous combination of lion, bear, leopard, and ten-horned monster. To be sure, the Beast as a symbol may possibly stand for a human being or a human institution in its rebellion against God. But it is no accident that it is represented as a beast. Though human beings may be involved, the nature of the thing is at root bestial. The tendency of the whole thing is subhuman, dehumanizing.

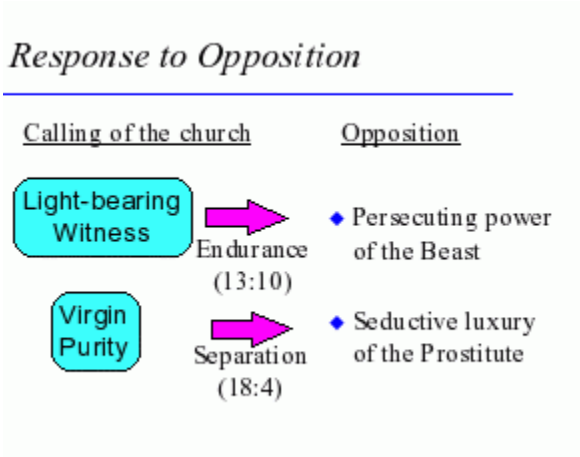
And that very fact is already an announcement of failure. The Beast cannot succeed, because he is bestial. Christ is not only "second" (1 Cor. 15:47), but last (1 Cor. 15:45). No one else can be a "third" after him, in the way that the Beast attempts to do. Gen. 1:28 indicates that the beasts are to be subordinate to Adam. And in the last days the last Adam will make all beasts subject to him, including this great Beast. Christ wages war in Revelation 19, not only on behalf of God and his justice, but on behalf of man and his welfare. He frees us forever from the threat of bestial tyranny. As the last Adam, he achieves perfect dominion. The Beast is subjected to Man.



One other form of counterfeiting in Revelation needs to be mentioned. We have seen that an unholy trinity consisting of Satan, the Beast, and the False Prophet counterfeits the holy Trinity consisting of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What about the worshipers of God? The worshipers of God are represented in Rev. 19:7-8 as the pure bride of the Lamb. Can Satan counterfeit the bride? He can and does. The counterfeit image of the bride is the prostitute of Rev. 17-18. To the purity of the bride corresponds the corruption and immorality of the prostitute. The fall of the prostitute becomes the

occasion for the manifestation of the bride (19:1-6). Since the bride represents true worshipers, the true people of God, we infer that the prostitute represents false worshipers, the worshipers and Satan and his idolatrous devices. It is the counterfeit church.

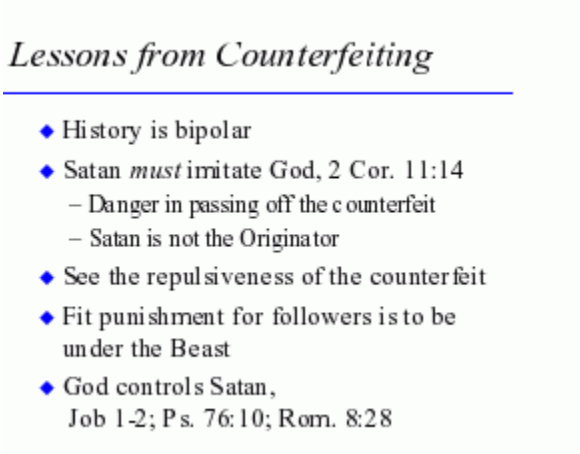
Satan attacks the church directly through deceit and doctrinal confusion. He tries to turn away the church from the truth (12:15). But he also raises up underlings, in the form of the Beast and the Prostitute, who attack the church in specific, complementary ways. The Beast represents worship of state power and the threat of persecution for those who do not worship. It attempts through threat, pain, and death, to terrorize Christians into giving in to an idol. It stirs up fear of what will happen if you don't give in. We can generalize this tendency: we worship what we fear, whether the scorn of human beings, or physical pain, or poverty. The remedy, of course, is fear of God, awe of him such as drives out the fear of man and of adverse circumstances.



On the other hand, the Prostitute represents worship of sex, money, and pleasure. Instead of threats and fear, she uses seduction and the lure of pleasure. Give in to your illicit desires. We worship what we desire, whether sex or money or health or long life or fame or riches. The remedy is the desire for the pleasure of the presence of the God in the new Jerusalem (22:4).

Practical Lessons

We can immediately draw some practical lessons. Revelation shows that history involves spiritual war. In this war there are two sides. You are either for God or against him. You either serve God, or in one way or another you will be found worshiping Satan and his bestial agents (cf. Rev. 13:7-8). Thus Revelation implicitly issues a challenge like Joshua: "choose this day whom you will serve" (Josh. 24:15). Giving our loyalty to God is absolutely crucial in determining the sort of life we have and the contribution that we make. Revelation reveals the crucial issues of life and the crucial destinies toward which life moves.


Lessons from Counterfeiting
History is bipolar
Satan must imitate God, 2 Cor. 11:14
– Danger in passing off the counterfeit
– Satan is not the Originator
See the repulsiveness of the counterfeit
Fit punishment for followers is to be under the Beast
God controls Satan, Job 1-2; Ps. 76:10; Rom. 8:28

The fact that Satan engages in counterfeiting helps us to understand and prepare for the spiritual war. Counterfeiting implies both danger and hope. The danger lies in the fact that Satan may fool people. The counterfeit is close enough to the truth to suck people into its grip.

But hope lies in the fact that Satan and his cohorts will surely be defeated. In fact, their defeat is implied in the facts about who they are. Satan aspires to be god. But he cannot succeed. He is not the creator or originator, but only an imitator. He is constantly dependent on God. Similarly, the Beast is bestial, subhuman, and his kingdom must submit to the kingdom of the Man, the last Adam.

Revelation also gives us a key for escaping Satan's deceit. Though Satan continues to deceive the world, Revelation unmasks his devices in order to arm us to resist him. The world is in awe of the Beast and willingly worships him (13:3-4, 7). But when our eyes are enlightened by Revelation, we see how hideous he is. We may still be tempted to fear him because he looks so powerful. But, having seen him for what he is, can we honestly want to have him as our master?

Revelation shows not only the horror of following the Beast, but something of the consequences. In following Christ, the last Adam, we are conformed more and more to his image (2 Cor 3:18; cf. 1 Cor. 15:49). By analogy, the followers of the Beast are in danger not only of being under his bestial tyranny, but of becoming beast-like with him, as they bear his mark (13:16-18). It is like what the psalms say of idolaters:

... their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eye, but they cannot see; ... Those who make them will be like them, and so will al who trust in them. (Psalm 115:4-8; cf. Psalm 135:18).

The punishment fits the crime.

Revelation uses irony in its depiction of God's opponents. Though they aspire to be godlike, they end up being like beasts. Satan aspires to be the creator, but imitating the true Creator is already a confession of failure. Satan's resistance looks terrifying to the casual observer, but the person who probes more deeply sees that it is a miserable, stupid failure from beginning to end.

Finally, through its depiction of spiritual warfare Revelation underlines an exceedingly important point: God is in control. He is in control not only of the general outline of history, but of its

beginning, its end, and its details. He controls even the works of Satan for his own glory! The idea of God controlling evil and bringing good out of it occurs here and there through the Bible: Job 1-2; Psalm 76:10; Romans 8:28; Acts 4:25-28. It is clear in Job 1-2 that both God and Satan are actors behind the disasters that happen to Job (Job 1:12; 1:21-22!). Satan intends to destroy Job's faith and integrity, and to disgrace the name of God as a result. God intends to magnify his own glory and cause Job's faith to grow through trial. Similarly, according to Acts 4:25-28, in the crucifixion of Christ Herod, Pontius Pilate, and the religious leaders perform their evil actions, filled with evil intent. In those very actions God accomplishes the salvation of the world. We do not comprehend fully how these things operate, but we can see that God's goodness and power are both absolute.

The same message comes out clearly in Revelation in pictorial form. Satan and his agents have impressive power and cleverness. Revelation does not conceal or minimize the reality of evil. The forces of evil, by their absolute opposition to God, and God's absolute opposition to them, underline the contrast between God's goodness and their evil. The warfare is real and bloody. But now ask, who is it that depicts the entire scene? Who is it that tells us not only what Satan is like, not only what he will in fact do, but what he must do because he has no alternative? It is God. God shows us the whole course of warfare beforehand, thereby showing how thoroughly he controls the entirety of history (cf. Isa. 41:21-29; 48:5-8).

1 In the original context, 1:3 is thinking of people who read Revelation aloud in a church meeting. The reading and hearing of the Bible in church remains important today, and needs greater attention than it usually receives. But the point applies indirectly to those who read and hear in other situations.

2 Tremper Longman, III, "The Divine Warrior: The New Testament Use of an Old Testament Motif," Westminster Theological Journal 44 (1982) 290-307.

Schools of interpretation

We need now to sort out the major ways in which people have interpreted Revelation. Interpreters disagree concerning the period of time and the manner in which the visions of 6:1-18:24 are fulfilled. Four main approaches or schools of interpretation have developed over the centuries. Preterists think that fulfillment occurs in the fall of Jerusalem (if Revelation was written in 67-68 A.D.) and/or the fall of the Roman Empire. Futurists think that fulfillment occurs in a period of final crisis just before the Second Coming. Historicists think that 6:1-18:24 offers a basically chronological outline of the course of church history from the first century (6:1) until the Second Coming (19:11). Idealists think that the scenes of Revelation depict not specific events but principles of spiritual war. The principles are operative throughout the church age and may have repeated embodiments.

Let us illustrate with 13:1-8. When and how does the imagery of the Beast find fulfillment? Preterists see in the Beast the persecution of Christians by the Roman emperor. Futurists see a future antichrist figure, the man of lawlessness of 2 Thess. 2:3-8. Historicists find here the pope, who persecuted the Reformation. (But some Roman Catholic historicists would say Martin Luther!) Idealists think of state persecuting power whenever and wherever it rises to threaten Christians.

Or again, consider the vision of the locust plague in 9:1-11. Preterists say it "symbolizes the hellish rottenness, the internal decadence in the Roman Empire."3 Historicists associate it with the Islamic invasion of the West. The crowns of 9:7 are the turbans of the Arabs.4 The breastplates of iron in 9:9 stand for "the steel or iron cuirasses of the Arab warriors."5 The five months are 150 years, from 612, the public opening of Mohammed's mission, to 762, the removal of the Caliphate to Baghdad.6 For Seiss the futurist all the material is a literal description of future agents of judgment.7 For Hendriksen the idealist it a generalized picture of how the wicked suffer for their wickedness: "can you conceive of a more frightful and horrible and true(!) picture of the operation of the power of darkness in the soul of the wicked during this present age."8

A combination of these views is probably closest to the truth. The imagery in Revelation is multifaceted, and is in principle capable of multiple embodiments. Idealists maintain that general principles are expressed. If so, those principles had a particular relevance to the seven churches and their struggles in the first century (1:4; see under Occasion and Purpose). The principles also will come to climactic expression in the final crisis of the Second Coming (22:20; cf. 2 Thess. 2:1-12). We ourselves are involved in the same spiritual war, and so we must apply the principles to ourselves and our own time (see note on 1:3). Hence, many passages have at least three main applications, namely to the first century, to the final crisis, and to us in whatever time we live.

Let us consider the main points in favor of each of the four main approaches.

Idealism: Repeated Pattern of fulfillment

What indications in Revelation favor an idealist approach?

What we have already seen concerning Satanic counterfeiting favors idealism. On a basic level, Satan's methods are always the same. He must be an imitator of God, because he is not the creator or originator. Since God is always the same, Satanic counterfeiting will always be the same.

Moreover, as we shall see in examining the structure of Revelation, the appearing of God in Rev. 4-5 is at the heart of the Book. God's character is at the bottom of all the visions, and determines in profound ways what John sees. Revelation is about theophany, God appearing. God appears climactically and finally at the time of the Second Coming. But even now he rules from his heavenly throne and is present with us. The manner of his rule and presence is determined by who he is in heaven. Hence, there is theologically a common character to the entire age. Moreover, God's action now has similar structure to his climactic appearance, in conformity with the general New Testament pattern of "inaugurated eschatology." Through Christ's resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are sons of God right now (Rom. 8:14-17). At the Second Coming we receive sonship in fullness (Rom. 8:23). In union with Christ we have resurrection life now (Col. 3:1). At the Second Coming we will have resurrection bodies (1 Cor. 15:50-56; Phil. 3:21).

Several more minor points support the idea that Revelation intends to describe the entire period between the First and Second Coming of Christ.

- Revelation addresses itself to "his servants," thereby including all Christians in all locations and times (1:1; 22:6, 18).

- The 7 churches in Rev. 2-3 stand for all churches everywhere. Other churches in the same region (at Colossae and Hierapolis) are not mentioned. It appears that 7 churches are selected because 7 symbolically represents completeness. The refrain near the end of the message to each church is "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). "He who has an ear" includes in principle any Christian. The word churches in the plural suggests that people ought to listen to all the messages, not merely the one addressed immediately to their church. Hence, the messages are applicable generally, and this generality would include even those beyond the membership of all seven churches together—not only people at Colossae and Hierapolis, but in any location and any time.
- The fluidity and multifaceted character of symbols opens the way to seeing multiple applications.
- Revelation 4:1 and 1:1 indicate that Revelation is unfolding the period of "last things" (eschatology) included in Dan. 2:45, which encompasses the entire period between the First and Second Coming of Christ.9
- Rev. 4:1, "what must take place after this," has exactly the same words in Greek as Dan. 2:45 (Theodotion's translation). Similar wording, "what must soon take place," opens Revelation in 1:1. There are further subtle connections. In Dan. 2:45 God showed the king what must take place. In Revelation God shows his servants what must take place. In Dan 2:45 "the dream is true and the interpretation is trustworthy." In Rev. 19:11 (cf. 1:5) Christ is "faithful and true" (the same Greek words). Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2 sets out the course of history. After a succession of godless world empires the kingdom of God comes in the time of the fourth empire, the Roman Empire (2:40-44). Daniel includes both inauguration and the consummation of God's kingdom in a very brief description (2:44). Thus the entire age between the First Coming of Christ (inauguration in the Roman Empire period) and the Second Coming (consummation) is included. All of this eschatological action is hundreds of years distant from Daniel's own time. John, on the other hand, finds himself right in the middle of the action. What was distant for Daniel is therefore "soon" for John—indeed, already beginning to take place before his eyes.
- Note also that God designed Scripture to be applied. Since all Scripture is profitable (2 Tim. 3:17), so is Revelation. If it is canon, it applies to us.
- In view of 2 Timothy 3:17, even if one of the other schools of interpretation is correct, it must find an application for us. To do so, it must generalize beyond the particular circumstances of the first century (preterism) or the final crisis (futurism). The generalized truth that it uncovers will match the idealist's viewpoint. Hence, in terms of application for today, any of the four approaches tends to yield roughly the same results as an idealist approach.

Insights from Futurism: Fulfillment in the Final Crisis

What indications in Revelation appear to favor futurism?

- Revelation looks forward above all to the great event of Christ's Coming.

- The celebration at the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:6-9) and the appearing of Christ to fight the final battle (19:11-21) seem unmistakably to point to the Second Coming.
- The vision of the new Jerusalem in 21:1-22:5 shows a perfection that lies on the other side of the Second Coming (cf. 21:8; 21:27; 22:4-5).
- The "time" in 1:3 is the time when Christ comes, according to 22:10-12.
- 1:7 describes the Second Coming: "every eye will see him."
- The final promise, "Yes, I am coming soon" (22:20) refers to the Second Coming. The liturgical response, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus," reiterates the prayer of the early church, "Come O Lord" (1 Cor. 16:22), originally in Aramaic ("Marana tha"). The church knew that Christ might "come" in a sense to have fellowship with them in the Lord's Supper, and that he might "come" to execute judgment on unbelief as in the fall of Jerusalem (Luke 21:20-24). But we cannot exclude from this prayer the reference to the most exciting, climactic, and desired coming of all, the Great Coming when he appears (1 Thess. 4:13-5:11). The Second Coming was the great hope of the early church, and with that hope in mind first century Christians would have read Revelation.

Preterism (fulfillment in the Roman Empire)

What indications appear to favor preterisim (fulfillment in the Roman Empire)?

The strongest evidence for a preterist approach lies in the connections of Revelation to the situation of the 7 churches. Every one of the messages in Rev. 2-3 contains details about the church situation, including subtle allusions to the larger environment in the city (see commentary on chapters 2-3 and Colin Hemer's research on the 7 churches in The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia). The problems addressed in Rev. 2-3 continue to be in focus throughout the rest of the Book. The visionary material of Rev. 4:1-22:5 has many linkages backward. For example, references to "those who say that they are Jews and are not" (2:9; 3:9) are connected with the vision of the true Jews in 7:1-8. Satan's throne in 2:13 relates to the Dragon/Satan in 12:9. Martyrdom in 2:10, 13 links up with martyrdom in 6:9; 11:7; 13:15; 17:6; and 20:4. The promise of the tree of life in 2:7 links with the tree in 22:2. Jezebel in 2:20-22 links with the Prostitute of 17:3ff. And so on. Through these linkages it becomes clear that the whole Book, not just Rev. 2-3, addresses the problems and struggles of the 7 churches in the first century.

Other arguments also favor preterism. Revelation is apocalyptic literature (see on Apocalyptic), and according to many scholars all apocalyptic literature is about its own time, not the distant future.

But this argument rests on a fallacious generalization. Within the Bible, Numbers 23-24, Ezekiel, Daniel 7-12, Isaiah 24-27, Zechariah, 1 Thess. 4-5, 2 Thess. 1-2, the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21), and Revelation are examples of apocalyptic literature (see below under Genre). All of these were designed to have practical value for the immediate audience, but often through the means of including predictions about the distant future. One may also find predictions about the future in extrabiblical apocalyptic: for example, 1QM, 1 Enoch, and 4 Ezra.

Revelation says that the time is near (1:1, 3: 22:10). "The time" in question must be the time in which the bulk of the visions find fulfillment. It is not adequate to interpret this language as

affirming merely a theoretical imminence of the Second Coming. It is true that no one knows the exactly time of Christ's Coming (Mark 13:32-37; Acts 1:7). The "we" language in Paul shows that, as far as he knew, Christ might return while he was still alive (1 Thess. 4:13-5:11; 1 Cor. 15:51). That is to say, Christ's Coming may be near; it may be soon. But 1:3 and 22:10 assert that the time is near. They offer us a confident assertion, not a confession of ignorance.

Nearness of the Time

The assertion of nearness might seem to be in tension with the arguments in favor of futurism. If the time of fulfillment includes the Second Coming, how can it be "soon" and "near"? This question is so vexing that it deserves separate attention. Interpreters have offered several solutions.

First, according to many modernists and unbelievers, John was wrong. He predicted that the Second Coming would be soon, but it was not.

This solution is unacceptable. It denies the divine authority of the Bible and judges itself wiser than God, just as Satan has always tempted us to do (Gen. 3:1-5).

Second, the beginning of the fulfillments is near, because 6:1-3 receives its fulfillment soon.

But 1:3 and 22:10 are like bookends enclosing the whole prophecy of Revelation. The fulfillment of everything, not just a part, is near.

Third, the "coming" of Christ that Revelation anticipates is not the Second Coming, but various "comings" before the End in order to punish or reward. Note the mention of Christ coming in 2:5; 2:16; 3:11.

But in reply we may say that 2:5; 2:16; and perhaps 3:11 have contexts that limit or even redefine the kind of "coming" in view. 1:7; 22:20; and 21:1-22:5 do not have these same limitations.

Fourth, the Second Coming is imminent (may be near).

But see the discussion under preterism for the problems with this approach. To say that we do not know the time is not the same as saying that it is near, as a promise.

Fifth, the "nearness" is a structural nearness belonging to the whole period of inaugurated eschatology, from the First Coming to the Second.

The connection with Dan. 2:45, discussed under Idealism, seems to point in this direction. What is distant from Daniel's point of view is now near—indeed, already in process. Moreover, neither Old Testament prophecy nor New Testament prophecy are preoccupied with quantities of time as measured by the clock. They focus more on the character of the times. Jesus' exhortations to watch (Mark 13:32-37) do not depend on whether the Second Coming is five days away or five millennia away, but on the character of the responsibility of disciples while he, the master, "leaves his house."

One may see a similar attitude in 1 John 2:17-18. "Dear children, this is the last hour." For John, it is not only the last days, but the last "hour"!. How can John say so? Does John make his pronouncement because he received some special esoteric notice from God about the quantity of time left? By no means. He expects rather to convince his readers of this truth by appealing to facts

that they already know. “You have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.”

John’s hearers already knew about antichrist in the singular, probably the same as the man of lawlessness in 2 Thess. 2, whom Christ destroys at the Second Coming (2 Thess. 2:8). Such antichrist opposition had been predicted in the vision of the little horn of Dan. 7:8, 20-22 (cf. Dan. 8:9). John then observes that there are many antichrists, in the plural. In their function these belong in the same broad category with the final antichrist (cf. 2 Thess. 2:7). They show that we are living in times structurally like the final crisis when the singular antichrist is revealed. They show that we are already in the period of Daniel’s little horn, a period that from an Old Testament prophetic point of view is the last hour before God’s judgment (Dan. 7:22).

The nearness in Revelation needs to be interpreted in the same way. Revelation describes throughout its pages the character of the interadvent period. This period according to Daniel lies just before the final judgment (see above on Idealism).

Think of a carnival. People using a sledgehammer try to propel a weight up to hit a bell at the top. The rising of the weight is like the rising of a crisis of persecution and antichrist activity. The weight gets near to top, that is, near to the Second Coming. It may rise and fall several times before someone finally succeeds in ringing the bell. Likewise, there may be many crises before the end, and each is near to the Second Coming.

Insights of Historicism: Fulfillment spread linearly through Church History

Of the four schools of interpretation historicism is undoubtedly the weakest, though it was popular centuries ago. With preterism, it correctly sees that Revelation begins with the situation of the seven churches. With futurism, it correctly sees that Revelation ends with the Second Coming. It also notices that Revelation moves toward a climax, that there is a drama of development as one reads through the book. So it simply stretches a time line from the first century in Revelation 2-3 to the Second Coming in 19:11-21, and trying to line up all the other visions somewhere in between.

But in the process it introduces the key assumption that the visions of Revelation follow one another in chronological order. In fact, the order is thematic, not purely chronological, as one can see from 12:5. (See the discussion below on Structure.) Hence, the historicist approach, insofar as it assumes a strict chronological order, must be abandoned.

Combining the Insights of the Schools

All the school except the historicist school have considerable merit. Can we somehow combine them? If we start with the idealist approach, it is comparatively easy to see how. The images in Revelation enjoy multiple fulfillments. They do so because they embody a general pattern. The arguments in favor of futurism show convincingly that Revelation is interested in the Second Coming and the immediately preceding final crisis (cf. 2 Thess. 2:1-12). But fulfillment in the final crisis does not eliminate earlier instances of the general pattern. We have both a general pattern and a particular embodiment of the pattern in the final crisis.

Likewise, the arguments in favor of preterism show convincingly that Revelation is interested in the seven churches and their historic situation. The symbols thus have a particular embodiment in the first century, and we ought to pay attention to this embodiment.

Finally, we have a responsibility to apply the message of Revelation to our own situation, because we are somewhere in church history, somewhere in the interadvent period to which the book applies. Here is the grain of truth in the historicist approach.

We can sum up these insights in a single combined picture. The major symbols of Revelation represent a repeated pattern. This pattern has a realization in the first century situation of the seven churches. It also has an embodiment in the final crisis. And it has an embodiment now. We pay special attention to the embodiment now, because we must apply the lessons of Revelation to where we are.

Content and Style

In the opening vision Christ appears as the majestic king and judge of the universe, and ruler of the churches (1:12-20). In 2:1-3:22 Christ addresses specific needs of each church. His powerful promises also remind the churches of the scope and profundity of their calling (2:7, 10-11, 17, 26-28; 3:5, 12, 21). The selection of exactly seven churches suggests the wider relevance of the message (see commentary on 1:4).

In 4:1-22:5 Christ's rebukes and encouragement take a new form. Through Christ and his angels (22:8-9, 16) John receives a series of visions intended to open our eyes to the kingship and majesty of God, the nature of spiritual warfare, God's judgments on evil, and the outcome of the conflict. God and his army must win the battle (17:14; 19:1-2), but his forces are opposed by Satan, the great Dragon (12:3), who leads the whole world astray (12:9). Satan has two agents, the Beast and the False Prophet, who together with him make up a counterfeit trinity (13:1-18; 16:13; see note on 13:1-10). The Beast, representing raw power and state persecution, threatens to suppress true witness and compel people to worship him (13:7-8). The False Prophet is his assistant and propagandist. Babylon, representing the worldly city and the desirable aspects of idolatrous society, threatens to seduce the saints away from spiritual purity (2:20-23; 17:1-18). In opposition to these threats the saints must maintain true witness, even to the point of martyrdom (12:11), and must maintain true spiritual purity (14:4; 19:8). In the consummation, their witness finds its fulfillment in the final light of God's truth (21:22-27), and their purity is fulfilled in the spotless bride of the Lamb (21:9).

The principal theme of Revelation is that God rules history and he will bring it to its consummation in Christ. At the center are the visions of Christ (1:12-16) and of God (4:1-5:14). God displays his majesty, authority, and righteousness as the ruler and judge of the universe (see commentary on 1:12-20). These central visions already foreshadow the consummation of history, when God's glory will fill all things (21:22-23; 22:5; see commentary on 4:1-5:14). Detailed elements in the visions flesh out these truths, and are to be seen as part of a larger picture.

Further information on content is contained in the commentary, especially in the summaries that occur at the beginning of each new section: 1:1-3; 1:4-5a; 1:5b-8; 1:9-11; 1:12-20; 2:1-3:22; 4:1-

5:14; 6:1-8:1; 8:2-11:19; 12:1-14:20; 15:1-16:21; 17:1-19:10; 19:11-21; 20:1-10; 20:11-15; 21:1-8; 21:9-22:5; 22:6-21.

Major Themes

A number of major themes run through the book. We discussed counterfeiting above. But there are many other important themes that interlock with this one.

God

Revelation is first of all God-centered. God controls the course of history. God protects his people and punishes rebellion. God will bring his purposes to final, spectacular realization in the new heaven and the new earth.

Worship

The appropriate response to God on the part of his creatures is worship. Scenes of worship occur throughout the book (1:12-20; 4:1-5:14; 7:9-17; 8:3-5; 11:16-19; 12:10-12; 14:1-7; 15:2-8; 16:5-7; 19:1-10; 20:4-6; 21:1-22:5). By showing us the marvel of who God is and what he does, Revelation calls us to respond with awe, godly fear, praise, faith, and obedience. Thus all of Revelation promotes true worship of God.

The Lamb

In the realization of God's purposes the Lamb has the key role (5:1-14). Jesus Christ is presented to us as the Lamb to symbolize his sacrificial death. His deity is shown by the fact that he shares God's names (the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, 1:8, 17; 22:13), God's throne (22:1), God's attributes (1:13-16 compared to Dan. 7:9-10), and his worship (5:13). Only through him, by virtue of his death and resurrection, can God's plan for history be unrolled (5:1-10). The Lamb mediates God's judgments in history (6:1; 19:11-21).

Visions

God discloses his purposes in visionary form (1:12-22:5), sometimes accompanied by sounds and verbal messages as well. Symbolic figures and scenes indicate the relation of God's plan to history. The symbolic form of communication seems strange to many modern readers, but it was familiar to the first century. Revelation belongs to a larger pattern or genre of communication called apocalyptic. (See on Apocalyptic.)

Theophany (God's appearing)

Revelation presents its concerns in visionary form. It is fitting, then, that at the thematic center of all the visions stands the vision of God himself. God appears. He appears enthroned in the midst of his heavenly angelic assistants in 4:1-11. He appears when Christ appears in 1:12-16. He appears climactically at the close of this age, at the Second Coming of Christ. The King comes. All the events of this age move forward toward the Second Coming. Revelation contains a dramatic momentum that increases as we near the Great Event.

In fact, in a broad way theophany, that is, God's appearing, controls the entire contents of Revelation. It is important not to rush by the descriptions of God appearing, as if these descriptions

were simply an extra frill, in order to get to the supposed "meat" contained in the details of prophecy. The main point is right there in who God is. The details are consequences deriving from who he is.

We can see something of the centrality of God's appearing as we travel through the main sections of the book. God appears through the appearing of Christ in 1:12-16. Christ is the announcer of the messages to the seven churches in Rev. 2-3. Moreover, the messages each begin with an allusion to the character of Christ as it is revealed in Rev. 1. All but the last two of the messages refer to some feature from the vision in 1:12-20. For example, at the beginning of the message to the church at Ephesus Christ says, "These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands" (2:1). He refers to the stars in 1:16 and lampstands in 1:12. The last two messages, to Philadelphia and Laodicea, show more distant connections. The "key of David" in 3:7 is similar to the "keys of death and Hades" in 1:18. The "faithful and true witness" of 3:14 corresponds to the "faithful witness" of 1:5.

The vision of God in 4:1-5:14 is obviously the key opening scene from which the action of the book unfolds. Subsequently, we find that there are seven cycles of judgment, each of which leads up to the Second Coming (see on Structure). The first of these cycles consists of the opening of the seven seals, 6:1-8:1. The seals belong to the heavenly book that appears in 5:1. The Lamb, who appears in 5:6, is the one who opens the seals. Thus the action in 6:1-8:1 is controlled by the Lamb and the sealed book from the vision in 5:1-14. The judgments issue from the presence of God.

The other cycles are similarly dependent on the appearing of God and his presence, though the kind of dependence is not always immediately obvious. The cycle of seven trumpets is set in motion by seven angels "who stand before God" (8:2). Hence, these judgments issue from the presence of God.

The cycle of symbolic histories in 12:1-14:20 has as a major focus the counterfeit trinity, consisting of the Dragon, the Beast, and the False Prophet. These three counterfeit the activity of the Trinitarian God (see on Counterfeiting). As such, they are dependent on God. Their appearance is a hideous counterfeit of his appearance.

The cycle of seven bowls in 15:1-16:21 issues from the temple of God (15:5-8). The temple is "filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power," a sign of his presence in theophany.

The next cycle, in 17:1-19:10, focuses on Babylon, the counterfeit of the Bride in 19:7. The Bridge reflects the glory of God in theophany (see 21:9, 11). Babylon is a counterfeit of this appearing.

The cycle with the rider, in 19:11-21, is an appearance of Christ, who is the divine warrior (see on Spiritual War).

The unit in 20:1-15 focuses on scenes of heavenly rule (20:4, 11-15), which involve theophany.

The vision of the new Jerusalem in 21:1-22:5 has at its center the "throne of God and of the Lamb" (22:1), who are seen by the worshipers (22:4).

Thus, theophany functions as a kind of origin for the symbolism of the entire visionary center of Revelation. Indeed, in a broad sense, all the material in 1:12-22:5 is a giant, complex theophany together with its accompaniments.

Spiritual war

Revelation goes underneath the surface in its analysis of history in order to show the spiritual forces at work. God and his agents war against Satan and his agents. Humanity is in the middle of this war. One's allegiance to God or to Satan, and the consequences in life, structure the meaning of history (see on Counterfeiting). By this spiritual perspective Revelation does not eliminate human responsibility and the significance of human action, but rather sets them in their final, cosmic and theistic context. It thus provides a powerful antidote to secularism. And it offers as well a powerful antidote to false religions, by showing us what is at stake. False religion can take the blatant form of non-Christians religions like Hinduism or Islam. Or it can infiltrate Christendom in the form of corruptions of the church—classic Roman Catholicism, modernism, legalism, or nominalism.

Bipolar contrasts: purity and corruption, beauty and ugliness, truth and deceit.

The focus on spiritual war alerts us to the polarity between good and evil. To eyes that are morally and religiously sleepy, things look very confused. And indeed, human beings often walk in a kind of moral twilight of mixed motives, where one seldom sees clearly the complex entanglement of good and evil motives in a single attitude or action. Revelation acknowledges that the existing situations are often painfully confused and frustratingly mixed (chapters 2-3). But it does so not to excuse us and permit a lapse into moral complacency, but in order to stir us up to undivided allegiance to God and the Lamb. For this purpose, stark contrasts between purity and corruption, beauty and ugliness, truth and deceit run through the book. The number of ways in which contrasts are depicted are so many dimensions of the total conflict. The difference between God's ways and Satan's ways touches on every aspect of life, whether it be purity, singleness of heart, moral action, aesthetic issues (beauty and ugliness), or cognitive issues (truth and error).

Witness and martyrdom

The theme of witness runs through the book. John "testifies to everything he saw" (1:2). He has "the testimony of Jesus" (1:2). Jesus Christ "is the faithful witness" (1:5) in a special, preeminent sense. Revelation contemplates a situation where Christians are subject to persecution for their faith (see on Occasion and Purpose). They may be subject even to the death penalty if they maintain their witness faithfully (2:13; 2:10; 13:15). Jesus Christ was martyred because of his faithfulness to God. Christians may face the same fate. But if so, they share also in Christ's victory over death (1:18). The whole of Revelation can be seen as one great call to faithfulness even to the point of death (2:10).

Reward and punishment

Faithfulness to Christ makes sense, even if we must pay a price. Revelation points to the fact that God is sovereign and God is just. He meets out punishments on rebels and he gives rewards to his faithful followers. The punishments and rewards include both the preliminary judgments in history, short of the Second Coming, and the final judgments at the Second Coming itself. Even though the saints may look small, weak, and defeated in human eyes, full vindication is coming in God's own time.

Apocalyptic

In its style and content, Revelation shows tantalizing similarities to some other writings in the Bible, and to others outside the Bible as well. Especially during the period from about 200 B.C. to 400 A.D., various writings of "apocalyptic literature" appeared. Among them were 1 QM (The War Scroll from Qumran), Assumption of Moses, 1-2-3 Enoch, 2-3 Baruch, 4 Ezra, Apocalypse of Peter, Apocalypse of Paul, Apocalypse of Thomas, and Ascension of Isaiah. Within the Bible, the following show some features of apocalyptic literature: Numbers 23-24, Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah 24-27, 1 Thessalonians 4-5, 2 Thessalonians 1-2, the Olivet Discourse, Revelation.

Leon Morris helpfully summarizes the nature of apocalyptic by indicating some of the features that tend to characterize it.10

- 1. Revelation of the secret things of God, inaccessible to normal human knowledge. Secrets of nature, of heaven, of history, of the end.
- 2. Pseudonymy
- 3. History rewritten as prophecy
- 4. Determinism in history ending in cosmic cataclysm which will establish God's rule.
- 5. Dualism (good and evil).
- 6. Pessimism about God's saving rule in the present.
- 7. Bizarre and wild symbols denote historical movements or events.

But "apocalyptic" is a loose category. Not all the writings share all the features. Revelation shares some but not all of the features above. And even the features that it shares it also modifies. Let us consider the above points one by one.

First, Revelation does offer a "revelation of the secret things of God." But a deeper analysis shows that very little in Revelation is completely new. It repeats in symbolic form the message of the rest of the New Testament. The "secrets" that it reveals are, to Christian believers, already open secrets rather than some weird, fancy, otherwise inaccessible knowledge.

Next, what about pseudonymy? Outside the Bible we find material like 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra, written long after the death of Baruch and Ezra, but pretending to contain secrets revealed to Baruch or Ezra while they still lived on earth. By contrast, Revelation comes simply from "John" (see on Author). It is not pseudonymous. It does not pretend to be something it is not.

3. Revelation does not report history as if it were prophecy. It is forward looking.

4. Determinism. Revelation does present us with a kind of determinism: God controls the entirety of history. Moreover, history leads up to a final cataclysm and the renewal of heaven and earth (21:1). But there are subtle differences. In Revelation, God's determinism is not fatalism. During this age, Christian action to obey Christ is important (e.g., 2:5,7, 10-11, 16-17, etc.). Earnest exhortation is an important aspect of the whole book, unlike some apocalyptic.

5. Dualism. Revelation contains an ethical dualism between good and evil, similar to apocalyptic. But this dualism is again not frozen or fatalistic. Through repentance people can cross from evil (death) to good (life) (22:17).

6. Pessimism. Pessimism about God's saving rule in the present is gone. Though the conflict is fierce, victory belongs not only to the future but even to the present, because the Lamb has already triumphed (5:5; 12:10-12).

7. Bizarre and wild symbols dominate the main visionary section of Revelation. But in this area as well, Revelation does something not so typical. The symbols may be bizarre and wild from a modern point of view, but they are not bizarre from the point of view of the original readers. Revelation introduces very little that is totally new. Rather, it combines and reworks symbols already present in earlier parts of the Bible; and occasionally it takes up common symbolism from outside the Bible as well.

A good deal of the uniqueness of Revelation arises from one central point. Revelation is a Christ-centered vision. Christ is the way to God, he is the mediator of God's plan for history. The truthfulness of Christ's witness, and the fact that Christ is the truth incarnate, make inappropriate the use of the "pious fictions" of pseudonymy and history-as-prophecy (points 2 and 3). The openness of Christian revelation make irrelevant a preoccupation with "secret" knowledge (point 1) and bizarre, novel symbolism (point 7). The determinism and dualism of Revelation (points 4and 5) are both qualified by the fact that Christ's death and resurrection introduces the great epoch of salvation. The gospel spreads to the nations and invites people everywhere to participate in salvation rather than remain under God's wrath. The pessimism of other apocalyptic is inappropriate because Christ has already triumphed (point 6).

Hence, we must not expect too much from comparisons of Revelation with extrabiblical apocalyptic literature. We learn mainly one thing: the use of complex symbolism was "in the air" at the time when John was writing. It would not have seemed as strange then as it does now.

Some modern people come to Revelation with the recipe, "interpret everything literally if possible." That recipe mistakes what kind of book Revelation is. Of course, John literally saw what he says he saw. But what he saw was a vision. It was filled with symbols, like the Beast of 13:1-8 and the seven blazing lamps in 4:5. It never intended to be a direct, nonsymbolical report of the future. People living in John's own time understood this matter instinctively, because they recognized that John was writing in a "apocalyptic" manner, a manner already as familiar to them as a political cartoon is today.

Author and Date

The human author identifies himself simply as John (1:1,4,9; 22:8). He was well known to the churches in Asia Minor (1:4, 11; see on Occasion and Purpose below). As early as the second century A.D. Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria identified the author as the Apostle John.11 The testimony of Justin Martyr and Irenaeus is particularly weighty. Justin lived for some time at Ephesus in the early second century, among those who still remembered John. Irenaeus, later bishop of Lyons, was in his youth a disciple of Polycarp in Asia, and Polycarp was a disciple of John.

In the third century, however, Dionysius bishop of Alexandria compared the style and themes of Revelation with the Gospel of John and concluded that the two must have different authors. Modern scholars find the same differences, and so various hypotheses have arisen to throw doubt

on Justin's and Irenaeus's testimony. On the balance it is still probable that the Apostle John was the human author.

Revelation stresses that its message and content derive ultimately from Jesus Christ and from God the Father (1:1, 11; 2:1; 22:16, 20). It possesses full divine authority (22:18-19). This divine authority, rather than the identity of the human author, remains most significant foundation for interpretation. Even if Revelation had a different human author from the Gospel of John and 1-2-3 John, it shares themes with the other Johannine writings and hence invites comparison with them. On the other hand, even if all the writings have the same author, Revelation belongs to a different genre. Hence, it must be appreciated in its special character and not be assimilated too quickly to the Gospel and the Letters.

Date

Revelation was written when persecution was impending (2:10, 13). In the figure of the Beast Revelation makes allusion to the fact that in Roman Empire the subject peoples were expected to worship the emperor as a god. Refusal to participate in such worship seemed to express political disloyalty. Hence we may ask when in the first century such a persecution took place. Irenaeus says that Revelation was written near the end of the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (81-96 A.D.).12 In later centuries the church thought of Domitian as one of the great persecuting emperors. While he was reigning he claimed divinity and was addressed as "god and lord." But in the earliest sources it is unclear how far he actually enforced the demand for worship. The other attractive date is at the end of the reign of the Emperor Nero (54-68 A.D.). In the early years of Nero's reign competent advisors had great influence, but the later years degenerated. He is notorious for having blamed Christians for the fire of Rome in 64 A.D. He used this accusation as an excuse to persecute them. But again, there is no clear evidence that this persecution ever extended outside the city of Rome. It is much more important to know what was going on in Asia Minor among the seven churches. Concerning this situation we have little information beyond what Revelation itself gives us.

Some interpreters think that Rev. 11:1-13, and especially 11:8, predict the fall of Jerusalem that took place in 70 A.D. Hence Revelation will have been written shortly before, perhaps in the last years of Nero's reign (about 66-68 A.D.). But 11:1-2 is symbolic of the church rather than the temple of stone in Palestine (see Commentary). 11:8 is also symbolic.

Rev. 17:10 is often cited in favor of a Neronian date. It says that the seven heads of the scarlet beast (17:3) "are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while." In agreement with preterism, and in agreement with the concern of God for the seven churches, it is appropriate to interpret and apply this statement with the first century setting. The Beast represents the Roman Empire in its idolatrous claims. The heads may therefore be successive emperors. Julius Caesar was the first emperor, followed by Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. Nero is therefore the sixth, which fits perfectly with 17:10. But there are several difficulties with this approach.

Does Revelation intend to begin the reckoning with Julius Caesar or with Augustus?

Among Roman and Jewish writings one may find writers beginning with either.13

Can one harmonize the history after Nero with a reckoning in which Nero is the sixth king?

After Nero come Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, who fought for control of the Empire in 68-69 A.D. Vespasian reigned from 69 to 79, Titus from 79-81, and Domitian from 81-96. Even though 68-69 was a time of confusion, all three figures Galba, Otho, and Vitellius "held the office and title of emperor,"14 and later historians include them in the lists. The climactic character of the seventh and eighth king must clearly correspond to something more dramatic than Galba or Otho.

The "five who have fallen" may be not five successive Roman emperors.

They may instead be five successive world-dominating empires: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece. The sixth, the one who "is," is then the Roman Empire in its totality. But it seems that the Beast of 17:3 and 13:1-8 is the Roman Empire rather than all the empires combined. Hence, it is more likely that 5 is a symbolic number. By saying that the sixth one "is," Revelation indicates that the final crisis, to take place with the seventh and climactic head, is just around the corner. Six is the number to choose in order to say that we are almost but not quite at the end. Five has no other significance than the fact that it is one less than six.

We have one piece of information from the Roman historian Suetonius that may help to date the onset of the most serious persecution. In his book Domitian Suetonius reports:15

[Under Domitian,] Besides other taxes, that on the Jews was levied with the utmost rigour, and those were prosecuted who without publicly acknowledging that faith yet lived as Jews, as well as those who concealed their origin and did not pay the tribute levied upon their people.

What is the significance of this note? Because of financial problems in the central administration, Domitian looked carefully for all possible sources of revenue. He enforced all the taxes that were already "on the books," but which may have fallen into disuse. Among these was a head tax of 2 drachmas levied on the Jews. Before the fall of Jerusalem this tax went for the upkeep of the temple in Jerusalem. After the destruction of Jerusalem it went to the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome.16 Jews paid this tax as an alternative to emperor worship.

The Roman administration understood that Jews were monotheists, and they were exempt from the normal requirement to show political loyalty to the Empire by emperor worship. But Christians were in danger. In the early days of Christianity Roman officials would have regarded Christians as one more Jewish sect (cf. Acts 25:19). But as the number of Gentile Christians multiplied, this classification would seem less and less appropriate. When Domitian began to enforce the tax, the status of Christians would naturally come up for investigation. Moreover, non-Christian Jews who were at enmity with the church might denounce Christians to the Roman authorities, saying, "These people claim to be Jews, but they are not." Hence, they would be suspected of disloyalty to the Empire, and subjected to enormous pressure, including possibly violent persecution. The possible role of Jewish denunciations may also illumine the meaning of the statements in Revelation about "those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan" (2:9; cf. 3:9).

Occasion and Purpose

Revelation is addressed to seven churches in Asia Minor (1:4,11; the area is now part of western Turkey). Each church received rebukes and encouragement, in accord with its condition (2:1-3:22).

Persecution had fallen on some Christians (1:9; 2:9,13; 3:9) and more was coming (2:10; 13:7-10). Roman officials would try to force Christians to worship the emperor. Heretical teachings and declining fervor tempted Christians to compromise with pagan society (2:2,4, 14-15, 20-24; 3:1-2, 15, 17). Revelation assures Christians that Christ knows their condition. He calls them to stand fast against all temptation. Their victory has been secured through the blood of the Lamb (5:9-10; 12:11). Christ will come soon to defeat Satan and all his agents (19:11-20:10), and his people will enjoy everlasting peace in his presence (7:15-17; 21:3-4).

1 In the original context, 1:3 is thinking of people who read Revelation aloud in a church meeting. The reading and hearing of the Bible in church remains important today, and needs greater attention than it usually receives. But the point applies indirectly to those who read and hear in other situations.

2 Tremper Longman, III, "The Divine Warrior: The New Testament Use of an Old Testament Motif," Westminster Theological Journal 44 (1982) 290-307.

3 Ray Summers, Worthy Is the Lamb (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1951) 158.

4 E. B. Elliott, Horae Apocalypticae (London: Seeley, Jackson, and Halliday, 1862) 1:435.

5 Ibid. 438.

6 Ibid. 463.

7 "They are extraordinary and infernal agents, whom Satan is permitted to let loose upon the guilty world, as a part of the judgment of the great day," J. A. Seiss, The Apocalypse (New York: Cook, 1900) 2:92.

8 William Hendriksen, More Than Conquerors (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1961) 147.

9 For extended discussion, see G. K. Beale, The Book of Revelation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 153-154

10 Leon Morris, The Revelation of St. John (London: Tyndale, 1969) 22-25; also Leon Morris, Apocalyptic (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

11 See, e.g., the extended discussion in Isbon T. Beckwith, The Apocalypse of John (reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 343-93.

12 Extended discussions of these and other introductory matters appear in scholarly commentaries and introduction. See, e.g., Donald Guthrie, New Testament Introduction, 4th rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990) 929-85.

13 Beckwith, Apocalypse 704-5.

14 Ibid. 705.

15 Suetonius, Domitian 12.2.

16 Colin Hemer, The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986) 8.

Structure

Revelation has some characteristics of apocalyptic literature (see on Apocalyptic). Like Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah, it contains visions with many symbolic elements. Using visual imagery as well as verbal promises and warnings, it weaves together into a vast poetic tapestry the themes of the whole rest of Scripture. Its depths are displayed through the multiplicity of its allusions.

The Prologue of Revelation (1:1-3) explains its basic purpose. 1:4-22:21 is a letter with greeting (1:4-5a), body (1:5b-22:20), and farewell (22:21). In formal features this arrangement parallels Paul's letters.

1:19 provides a clue for dividing up the main body of the book. There are three clauses. "What you have seen" consists in the vision that John has already experienced (1:12-20). "What is" consists in the present state of the churches (2:1-3:22). "What will take place later" consists in the future-oriented section in 4:1-22:5. The propriety of this threefold division is confirmed by the close match between "what will take place later" in 1:19 and the description in 4:1: "what must take place after this" (in Greek, only one word differs). This threefold division, however, is only a rough one. 2:1-3:22 contains future-oriented promises, and 4:1-22:5 contains much information relevant to the present situation of the churches.

How do we proceed to divide the large section from 4:1 to 22:5? Interpreters continue to differ over the proper divisions. Revelation is like a tapestry, with many interwoven patterns. Choosing one pattern as the basic one may lead to an outline of one type, while choosing a different pattern leads to a different outline. It is wiser, then, to recognize that no one outline or structural analysis captures everything. We here present several outlines and structures, each focusing primarily on a different aspect of the total patterning.

We may begin with a focus on "formal," grammatical patterning. Repeated phrases give us clues. The visions accompanying the opening of the seven seals belong together. Likewise, the seven trumpets belong together. Less obviously, major shifts of scene are indicated when John the seer is transferred to a new location. Each such transference takes place "in the Spirit," and in each case after the first there is a statement, "I will show you … ." We obtain the following outline.

Formal Clues in Revelation

I. Prologue 1:1-3

II. Introduction of the Letter 1:4-5a

III. Body of the Letter 1:5b-22:20

A. Body-Opening 1:5b-8

B. Body-Middle 1:9-22:17

1. Introduction 1:9

2. Visions 1:10-22:5

a. Vision of Christ (in the Spirit) 1:10-3:22

(1) The meeting with Christ 1:10-20

(2) Messages to the churches 2:1-3:22

(a) Ephesus 2:1-7
(b) Smyrna 2:8-11
(c) Pergamum 2:12-17
(d) Thyatira 2:18-29
(e) Sardis 3:1-6
(f) Philadelphia 3:7-13
(g) Laodicea 3:14-22

b. Vision in heaven (in the Spirit) (I will show you) 4:1-16:21

(1) Throne vision 4:1-11

(2) Scroll 5:1-14

(3) 7 seals 6:1-8:1

(a) 1st seal 6:1-2
(b) 2d seal 6:3-4
(c) 3d seal 6:5-6
(d) 4th seal 6:7-8
(e) 5th seal 6:9-11
(f) 6th seal 6:12-17
(g) parenthesis 7:1-17
(h) 7th seal 8:1

(4) 7 trumpets 8:2-11:19

(a) 7 angels together 8:2-6
(b) 1st angel 8:7
(c) 2d angel 8:8-9
(d) 3d angel 8:10-11
(e) 4th angel 8:12-13
(f) 5th angel 9:1-12
(g) 6th angel 9:13-11:14
(h) 7th angel 11:15-19

(5) the woman and the dragon 12:1-17

(6) the beast 13:1-10

(7) the lamb-beast 13:11-18

(8) the 144,000 14:1-5

(9) 3 angelic messengers 14:6-13

(10) the son of man 14:14-20

(11) 7 bowls 15:1-16:21

(a) the origin of the bowls 15:1-16:1
(b) 1st bowl 16:2
(c) 2d bowl 16:3
(d) 3d bowl 16:4-7
(e) 4th bowl 16:8-9
(f) 5th bowl 16:10-11
(g) 6th bowl 16:12-16
(h) 7th bowl 16:17-21

c. Vision in the wilderness (in the Spirit) (I will show you) 17:1-21:8

(1) the harlot Babylon 17:1-18

(2) announcement of the fall of Babylon 18:1-24

(3) joy in heaven 19:1-10

(4) the last battle 19:11-21

(5) the 1000 years

(6) the great white throne 20:11-15

(7) new heaven and earth 21:1-8

d. Vision on the great high mountain (in the Spirit) (I will show you) 21:9-22:5

3. Conclusion 22:6-17

C. Body-Closing 22:18-20

IV. Conclusion 22:21

In a second approach, we look at content rather than formal clues. The most important event toward which history moves is the Second Coming of Christ. Visions that describe the Second Coming mark important transitions. When we go to Revelation with this concern in mind, we find descriptions of the Second Coming no less than seven times! There are seven cycles of judgment, each leading up to the Second Coming. A final, eighth vision shows the new Jerusalem, the consummate state on the other side of the Second Coming. Here is the resulting outline:
Rhetorical Structure of Revelation

I. Prologue 1:1-3

II. Greeting 1:4-5a

III. Body 1:5b-22:20

A. Thanksgiving 1:5b-8

B. Main part 1:9-22:6

1. What you have seen 1:9-20

2. What is 2:1-3:22

3. What is to be 4:1-22:5

a. Cycle 1: 7 seals 4:1-8:1

b. Cycle 2: 7 trumpets 8:2-11:19

c. Cycle 3: symbolic figures and the harvest 12:1-14:20

d. Cycle 4: 7 bowls 15:1-16:21

e. Cycle 5: judgment of Babylon 17:1-19:10

f. Cycle 6: white horse judgment 19:11-21

g. Cycle 7: white throne judgment 20:1-21:8

h. The 8th and culminating act: new Jerusalem 21:9-22:5

C. Final instructions and exhortations 22:6-20

IV. Closing salutation 22:21

The cycles parallel one another. All cover the same period leading up to the Second Coming. But each cycle does so from its own distinct vantage point. Moreover, later cycles concentrate more and more on the most intense phases of conflict and on the Second Coming itself.

We may summary the focus of the different cycles as follows:
Commission:

7 seals 4:1-8:1. Commission of covenant judgment in heaven. The origin of God's triumph.
The prosecution of war:

7 trumpets 8:2-11:19 effects on earth

7 symbolic histories 12:1-14:20 depth of conflict

7 bowls 15:1-16:21 effects on earth, further intensity

Elimination:

7 messages of judgment on Babylon 17:1-19:10 elimination of the seductress

white horse judgment 19:11-21 elimination of the power source

white throne judgment 20:1-21:8 elimination of all evil

New Jerusalem

In the cycle of 7 seals and in the cycle of 7 trumpets we see a common pattern. First John sees an opening scene, which depicts the origin of the judgments that will take place during the cycle. Then come 6 successive judgments. Then we have an interlude, focusing on a message of promise and

comfort to the saints. Then follows the seventh judgment. The judgments are predominantly negative in character, but the interlude is predominantly positive. The origin of the judgments is both positive—a source of punishment to rebels and a source of comfort to saints. The structure can be represented as a pattern of a, b, a', bb. The a part is positive while the b part is negative. The double bb at the end represents a final, more intensive judgment. The prime on a' indicates that it is distinct from the original a.

1. Cycle 1: 7 seals 5:1-8:1

a. Scene: the recompenser 5:1-14
b. 6 judgments 6:1-17
a'. Promise for the church 7:1-17
bb. 7th judgment 8:1

2. Cycle 2: 7 trumpets 8:2-11:19
a. Scene: recompensers 8:2-6
b. 6 judgments 8:7-9:21
a'. Promise for the church 10:1-11:14
bb. 7th judgment 11:15-19

Since the pattern is so clear in cycles 1 and 2, it is natural to try to detect it in the remaining cycles. We obtain the following as a more complex analysis:

I. Introduction: the participants 1:1-11

II. Body: the message 1:12-22:5

A. The judge 1:12-20

B. Preliminary promises and warnings for the churches 2:1-3:22

A'. Judgment for the world 4:1-21:8

A. Scene: recompenser-creator 4:1-11

B. 6 cycles of judgment 5:1-19:21

1. Cycle 1: 7 seals 5:1-8:1

a. Scene: the recompenser 5:1-14
b. 6 judgments 6:1-17
a'. Promise for the church 7:1-17
bb. 7th judgment 8:1

2. Cycle 2: 7 trumpets 8:2-11:19

a. Scene: recompensers 8:2-6
b. 6 judgments 8:7-9:21
a'. Promise for the church 10:1-11:14
bb. 7th judgment 11:15-19

3. Cycle 3: 7 symbolic histories 12:1-14:20

a. Scene: two poles; the woman and the dragon 12:1-6
b. 6 symbolic histories 12:7-14:11
(1) The dragon's history 12:7-12
(2) The woman's history 12:13-17
(3) The (sea) beast 13:1-10
(4) The earth beast or false prophet 13:11-18
(5) The 144,000 14:1-5
(6) The angelic proclaimers 14:6-11
a'. Promise for the saints 14:12-13
bb. 7th symbolic history: the harvest of the Son of Man 14:14-20

4. Cycle 4: 7 bowls 15:1-16:21

a. Scene: the recompensers 15:1-8
b. 6 judgments 16:1-14,16
a'. Promise for the church 16:15
bb. 7th judgment 16:17-21

5. Cycle 5: 7 messages of judgment on Babylon 17:1-19:10

a. Scene: symbolic actors (recipients) 17:1-6
b. 6 messages of destruction 17:7-18:19
(1) 1st angelic message 17:7-18
(2) 2d angelic message 18:1-3
(3) 3d heavenly message 18:4-8
(4) The kings of the earth 18:9-10
(5) The merchants 18:11-17
(6) The seafaring men 18:18-19
a'. Promise for the saints 18:20
bb. 7th message of destruction 18:21-24

a". 7-fold joy in heaven 19:1-10 19:1-2, 3, 4, 5, 6-8, 9, 10

6. Cycle 6: the white horse judgment 19:11-21

a. Scene: the recompenser 19:11-16
b. Angelic message of destruction 19:17-18
a'. Promise for the saints 19:19c.
bb. Final judgment of the beast and the false prophet 19:19-21

A'. Promise for the saints 20:1-10

a. Scene: recompenser 20:1
b. Preliminary judgment 20:2-3
a'. Promise for the saints 20:4-6
bb. Final judgment of opponents and Satan 20:7-10

BB. Cycle 7: the white throne judgment 20:11-21:8

a. Scene: recompenser 20:(7-10)11
b. Divine judgment 20:12-15
a'. Promise for the saints 21:1-7
bb. Exhaustive judgment 21:8

BB. Final promised blessing of the consummation 21:9-22:5

III. Concluding remarks and exhortations 22:6-21
In addition to these patterns, still other patterns exist in the form of chiasms, that is, mirror-image patterns.

Symbolic personages are introduced into the drama one by one, and then their destinies are assigned in the reverse order, as follows:

A. The people of God depicted with the imagery of light and creation 12:1-2

B. The Dragon, Satan 12:3-6

C. The Beast and the False Prophet 13:1-18

D. The Bride: The people of God in the imagery of sexual purity 14:1-5

E. Babylon the prostitute 17:1-6

E. Babylon destroyed 17:15-18:24

D. The Bride is blessed with marriage 19:1-10

C. The Beast and the False Prophet are destroyed 19:11-21

B. The Dragon is destroyed 20:1-10

A. The people of God in the imagery of light and creation 21:1-22:5

There also seems to be a major chiasm involving themes:

Chiastic Thematic Structure in Revelation: Especially War

A. Leading into the visions: the seer, the revealers, and the audience 1:1-11
1. Prologue 1:1-3
a. Title 1:1a.
b. The witness 1:1b-2
c. Reading the prophecy 1:3
2. Participants 1:4-11

B. Christophany 1:12-20

C. Recompense to the churches: church militant 2:1-3:22

D. Throne vision 4:1-5:14

E. 7 seals: rider judgments (1-4 focus on humans) 6:1-8:1
1. Content of the judgments 6:1-17
2. Preservation of the church 7:1-8:1

F. 7 trumpets: angelic judgments (1-4 focus on nature) 8:2-11:19
1. Judgment of the nations 8:2-9:21
2. Preservation of the church 10:1-11:13
3. Joy in heaven 11:15-19

G. The redeemed 12:1-6
(with intermixed strife 12:3-6)

H. Deceptive opponent (Satan) 12:7-17

I. Destructive opponent (Beast) 13:1-10

H. Deceptive opponent (False Prophet) 13:11-18

G. The redeemed 14:1-20
(with intermixed strife 14:6-20)

F. 7 bowls: angelic judgments (1-4 focus on nature) 15:1-19:10
1. Judgment of the nations 15:1-16:21
2. End of the pseudochurch Babylon 17:1-18:24
3. Joy in heaven 19:1-10

E. White horse: rider judgment (focus on humans) 19:11-20:10
1. Content of judgment 19:11-21
2. Preservation of the church 20:1-10

D. Throne vision 20:11-15

C. Announcement of recompense to the churches: church triumphant 21:1-8

B. Theophany 21:9-22:5

A. Leading out of the visions: the seer, the revealers, and the audience 22:6-21
2. Participants 22:6-17
1. Epilogue 22:18-21
c. Reading the prophecy 22:18-19
b. The witness 22:20
a. Colophon 22:21

Many other thematic features unify the book (see on Major Themes). Repeated use of the number seven signifies completeness. God's plan and power determine the outcomes. Praise to God rises from the angels and from the saints (see note on 1:6). Satanic counterfeits oppose God in a spiritual war of cosmic proportions. The present struggles of the church (2:1-3:22) contrast with its final rest. The church must maintain its witness and its purity. Everything moves forward to the victory of Christ at his Coming.

Because it is so important to pay attention to the larger picture, the accompanying notes do not attempt to explain every detail. For details students should consult a reliable commentary, such as the ones by Leon Morris, G. K. Beale, and Robert Mounce. Many details can be interpreted in more than one way. The notes seldom include a representation of all important options. Patience and humility are needed when we confront disagreements on these matters. In the meantime, Revelation has broad lessons from which all can profit.

1 Leon Morris, The Revelation of St. John (London: Tyndale, 1969) 22-25; also Leon Morris, Apocalyptic (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

2 See, e.g., the extended discussion in Isbon T. Beckwith, The Apocalypse of John (reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 343-93.

3 Extended discussions of these and other introductory matters appear in scholarly commentaries and introduction. See, e.g., Donald Guthrie, New Testament Introduction, 4th rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990) 929-85.

4 Beckwith, Apocalypse 704-5.

5 Ibid. 705.

6 Suetonius, Domitian 12.2.

7 Colin Hemer, The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986) 8.

Commentary

Prologue, 1:1-3

The main portion of Revelation (1:4-22:21) has the form of a letter (see Introduction: Structure). 1:1-3 functions as its prologue. It helps to orient readers to the kind of contents they may expect. Stress is placed on the divine authority of the message (from God and Jesus Christ), its certainty ("must" in v. 1), and its crucial relevance (v. 3). God makes thorough provision for the communication process: the message originates with God the Father, is given to Jesus Christ, and is made known to John through an angel (v. 1). John testifies by writing it (v. 2), and all are encouraged to read and hear (v. 3).

Though Revelation comes in symbolic form, it is understandable. It is "revelation," disclosing rather than hiding truth (v. 1). It is for "his servants," not a special elite (v. 1). God expects us to "take to heart what is written," to profit spiritually (v. 3). A blessing encourages people to read and hear (v. 3).

The book identifies itself as **the revelation of Jesus Christ**. This expression might mean a revelation with Jesus Christ as its source. Or it might mean a revelation with Jesus Christ as its principal content. Both possibilities express important truths.

Two factors weigh decisively in favor of the first meaning (Jesus Christ is source). First, the immediate context in 1:1-3 focuses on the means and channels of revelation. God the Father is the ultimate source, Jesus Christ is the mediator, he sends "his angel," John writes the message, and others read it aloud (1:3). Second, though the rest of the book does indeed have a sustained Christological focus, the content is Trinitarian and not exclusively Christological in the narrowest

sense. The focus is also on what happens in history. The events are mediated by Christ, but the events can still be distinguished from him.

How can the events take place "soon" (v. 1) if now almost 2000 years have passed? See 22:6, 7, 10, 12, 20. Spiritual war takes place throughout the church age, and the seven churches will soon experience all the dimensions of the conflict. Moreover, the "last days" of Old Testament prophecy have been inaugurated by Christ's resurrection (Acts 2:16-17). The time of waiting is over, and God is conducting the final phase of his victorious warfare against evil. By such reckoning, today is "the last hour" (1 John 2:18).

The wording in 1:1 seems to be built on Dan. 2:45. In Dan. 2:45 God showed King Nebuchadnezzar "what will take place in the future." In Rev. 1:1 God shows his servants what must take place "soon." In Daniel the vision is impressively far-ranging. It starts with Nebuchadnezzar's time, but then reaches out to encompass subsequent pagan world empires until the times when God's kingdom is established (Dan. 2:44-45). This kingdom of God was inaugurated by the first coming of Christ (Mark 1:15; Luke 11:20; Rom. 14:17), but its consummation is still to come. We live "in the last days" (2 Tim. 3:1, 12; Heb. 1:2), in the middle of fulfillments that are still working themselves out. Daniel spoke of events that, from his perspective, were in the far future. These events are now happening around us. Hence, Revelation properly says that they are "soon," in contrast to the distance that Daniel saw. We are to understand that these days—from the first century until now—are the "end times" of spiritual conflict, with "many antichrists" (1 John 2:18). Whether a secular clock measures the time until the Second Coming as a few hours or many centuries is irrelevant.

Verses 2 and 3 characterize Revelation in helpful ways. It is **the testimony of Jesus Christ** (v. 2). Because of the imminence of persecution threatening to suppress Christian witness (17:6), Revelation is full of the theme of witness. Jesus Christ is the preeminent witness (1:5; 3:14; 19:11). Imitation of him may include martyrdom (12:11). Revelation itself is a witness, a testimony. It intends in turn to strengthen the testimony of its readers. Its message carries full divine authority and authenticity (22:20, 6, 16; 19:10).

Revelation not only pronounces judgment on the faithless, but blessing on the faithful (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). In verse 3 the blessing is specifically on those who read and on those who hear. God encourages us not to shy away from the book just because some have wrongly viewed it as an impossible puzzle. In the first century, **the one who reads** would refer to a person reading the book out loud to a Christian congregation. Reading out loud was especially important when few copies were available and when some people could not read. But it is still valuable today, because churches as a body and not merely individuals are to respond (1:11; 2:1-3:22).

In verse 3, Revelation is **prophecy**. See 22:7-10, 18-19. Like Old Testament prophecy, Revelation combines visions of God's future with exhortation to faithfulness. Prophecy is a preeminent form of the witness that all of us are to give as Christians (see note on 1:2).

We are to **take to heart** what is written (1:3). Revelation is not intended to tickle our fancy but to strengthen our hearts. (See Introduction: Interpretation.)

The Letter's Greeting, 1:4-5a

1:4-5a consist in a greeting that belongs to the opening part of a normal Greek letter. See Introduction: Structure. In the first century, instead of the modern form "Dear Mary," people wrote "X to Y" (author to reader), as the example in Acts 23:26 shows. Paul may have been the first to give letters a specifically Christian thrust by adding "grace to you and peace" instead of a more colorless introduction, "greetings" (Acts 23:26; James 1:1).

The human author identifies himself simply as **John** (1:4). John the Apostle was so well known to the seven churches that he needs no more precise identification. (See Introduction: Author.)

The book goes **to the seven churches**. Cf. 1:11; 2:1-3:22. Revelation is organized in sevens (see Introduction: Outline), the symbolic number of completeness (Gen. 2:2-3). The choice of seven churches not only expresses this theme but hints at the wider relevance of the message to all churches in all times (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 1:1, 3; 22:7, 11-14, 16, 18-21). (See Introduction: Occasion.)

The Roman province of Asia lies in what is now western Turkey. The Apostle John resided in Ephesus, in Asia Minor, before the banishment of 1:9. He knew and sympathized with the people to whom he wrote. The incarnation of Christ is unique, but its principle is imitated every time God comes and speaks to us through human beings who are close to us and can identify with our circumstances.

Salvation comes **from him who is, and who was, and who is to come**. This designation of God is similar to the divine name in Exodus 3:14-15 (see also 1:8). God is Lord of the present, the past, and the future. Revelation deliberately introduces grammatical irregularities, which we can only begin to capture in English by translating "from he who is, and he who was, and who is to come." Using an unchangeable he, instead of the expected him, underlines the absoluteness of God, absolute in his being, his sovereignty, and his relation to time. We might expect the last of the three phrases to be "who will be." Instead, we have **who is to come**, underlining the dynamic unfolding of God's plan. The meaning of the future resides ultimately in the expectation that God will come. He will appear in a final manifestation that brings history to its consummation. Accordingly, the drama of Revelation moves towards the Second Coming, and stirs up our anticipation and hope for the day of Christ's appearing. The King is coming!

What are **the seven spirits**? From God alone come grace and peace, so we cannot make this phrase refer to mere creatures. The phrase describes the Holy Spirit in sevenfold fullness (see 4:5; Zech. 4:2, 6). Note the origin of grace and peace from the Trinity: God the Father ("him who is"), the Son (1:5), and the Spirit (cf. 1 Pet. 1:1; 2 Cor. 13:14).

The key role of Jesus Christ in the whole of Revelation is already anticipated in verse 5a. Christ is **faithful witness**, whom our witness imitates (see 1:2). He is **the first-born from the dead**, meaning that his resurrection is the foundation and pattern for the promised resurrection of believers (see Col. 1:18). Christ was apparently defeated when his religious enemies succeeded in putting him to death. But this apparent defeat according to human reckoning turned into a glorious, everlasting victory through his resurrection. Likewise, if Christians have to face martyrdom, their death is a defeat only according to worldly eyes. God will apply Christ's victory to those who die for him (2:10; 11:11-12; 11:18; 14:13; 20:4-6). (See note on 1:18.) Finally, Christ is **ruler of the kings of the earth**. Roman imperial power or modern state power may seem very impressive and terrifying,

but Christ's power is infinitely greater. (On God's rule, see note on 4:1-5:14 and Introduction: Interpretation.)

Praise, 1:5b-8

John praises God, in a way similar to the beginning of most Pauline letters. The themes of God's sovereignty, redemption, and the Second Coming recur throughout Revelation.

Christ has loved us and freed us (1:5b), as Revelation shows more fully in 5:1-14 and 19:1-22:5. His love and his conquest over sin give us security in the midst of trials and disasters that Revelation will describe. And they give us motivation to persevere when persecution or temptation or weariness threaten to overwhelm us.

Freeing us from sin removes negative consequences. The positive side of redemption is found in being made **a kingdom and priests** (v. 6). Saints enjoy God's rule and as priests have intimate access to him (Heb. 10:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:5-9). In the future they will reign with him (2:26-27; 3:21; 5:10; 20:4, 6). Even now people from all nations share in the priestly privileges given to Israel in Exodus 19:6. The purposes of redemption that were embodied in the exodus from Egypt, and the purposes of dominion given to man at creation, are both fulfilled through Christ (5:9-10).

The theme of priestly worship and access to God is complementary to the temple theme in Revelation (see note on 4:1-5:14).

In response to God's salvation, praise and worship are fitting (v. 6). The theme of worship and praise of God extends through Revelation Note the praises in 4:8, 11; 5:9-10, 12, 13; 7:12; 11:15, 17-18; 12:10-12; 15:3-4; 19:1-8. Utterances of praise are an integral part of the spiritual war. True worship expresses our fundamental allegiance to God. This worship should then spill over with profound effect through all our lives.

As an integral aspect of our worship we long for the Second Coming of Christ (1:7). Anticipation of this coming is important throughout Revelation. All persecution and opposition will cease, and Christian sufferers will be vindicated (21: 4).

Worship depends focally on knowing who God is, and so God identifies himself as **the Alpha and the Omega**, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. God is Alpha Creator and Omega Consummator. He is Lord of all—past, present, and future, as suggested by "he who is ..." (see 1:4; 4:1-5:14). His sovereignty in creation guarantees the fulfillment of his purposes in recreation (Rom. 8:18-25).

John's Commission, 1:9-11

In verses 9-11 an identification of John and his circumstances—in which he represents the whole church—prepares the way for the first main vision in 1:12-3:22.

John could at this point have underlined his authority by calling himself *apostle* or *prophet*. Instead, he emphasizes his solidarity with his readers: he is **your brother and companion**. He is a representative for what all Christians can expect to go through.

Christian experience has two sides: **suffering and kingdom**. Revelation, like the rest of the New Testament, is blunt about the reality of suffering (e.g., Matt. 10:17-39; Acts 14:22; 2 Tim. 3:10-13; 1

Peter). But in suffering we have the consolation of God's presence and his rule over us, which is already a participation in his kingdom (cf. 2 Cor. 1:3-11). In all circumstances we are victorious (Rom. 8:28-39). The combination of suffering and kingdom calls for **patient endurance**. The exhortation to endure and remain faithful runs through Revelation (2:2, 3, 13, 19; 3:10; 6:11; 13:10; 14:12; 16:15; 18:4; 20:4; 22:7, 11, 14). Revelation is not puzzling speculation, but practical exhortation in the midst of persecution and temptation (see Introduction: Occasion and Purpose).

Patmos is a small island off the west coast of Asia Minor. It had a Roman penal settlement, used for persons considered dangerous to good order. John had probably been exiled there on account of his uncompromising loyalty to Christ. John is thus a picture of the persecutions that may come to any Christian.

John received the revelations on **the Lord's Day**, Sunday, the Christian day of worship celebrating Christ's resurrection. The Sunday celebration anticipates the celebration of God's final victory (19:1-10).

John was **in the Spirit**, so that the Spirit provided John with the special visions and transported him to the vantage points for viewing (see 4:2, 17:3; 21:10). The Spirit gave John inspired authority of a unique kind. But this unique level of inspiration is still a pattern for the witness that all Christians are to bear. The whole church is to "prophesy" in an extended sense, by bearing the "testimony of Jesus" (cf. 11:1-12; 12:17; 19:10; 22:9).

John hears a **loud voice** (v. 10). We infer from the subsequent verses that it is Christ speaking. Elsewhere loud voices and noises indicate the power and universal relevance of the messages and events (1:15; 4:1, 5; 5:2, 12; 6:1; 7:2, 10; 8:5, 13; 10:3; 11:12, 15, 19; 12:10; 14:7, 9, 15, 18; 19:1, 3, 6, 17). Sometimes angels rather than Christ are the speakers. But Christ always stands behind the angels as the ultimate mediator, whom they imitate. Only through Christ do we have access to God's plan, his will, and the visions of his glory.

1:11 names the seven churches for the first time (see 1:4). The order is the same as that in which they will later receive seven distinct messages adapted to their needs (2-3). Perhaps intentionally, the order is also the one most convenient for a messenger who would travel from place to place to deliver the Book of Revelation to the churches.

Vision of Christ, 1:12-20

Rev. 1:12-16	Ezek. 1:25-28	Dan. 10:5-6	Dan. 7:9-10	Dan. 7:13-14
son of man	like that of a man	a man		son of man
robe		linen robe		
gold sash		gold sash		
white hair			white hair	
eyes like fire	fire	eyes like flame	fire	
feet like bronze	glowing metal	gleaming bronze		
voice like rushing water	sound like rushing water	sound of a multitude		
stars in hand				
face like the sun	radiance	like lightning		

Christ appears to John in overwhelming glory (cf. 21:22-24). The description combines features from several places in the Old Testament. "Like a son of man" alludes to Dan. 7:13. The features of 1:12-16 are reminiscent of Daniel 7:9-10, 10:5-6, and Ezekiel 1:25-28, but include more distant similarities to many Old Testament appearances of God. The vision shows Christ as judge and ruler—first of all over the churches (1:20-3:22), but also over the whole universe (1:17-18; 2:27; 3:21). His deity, his authority, and his conquest of death guarantee final victory (1:17-18; 17:14; 19:11-16). This vision of God's sovereignty, exercised through Christ, is a fundamental center point to the message of Revelation (see Introduction: Interpretation). Christ's warrior-like fierceness and armor-like bronze (1:15) anticipate his role in the final battle (19:11-21) and look backwards on God's battles in the Old Testament (Exod. 15:3; Deut. 32:41-42; Isa. 59:17-18; Zech. 14:3).

The lampstands symbolize the churches in their light-bearing or witness-bearing function (1:20; Matt. 5:14-16). The churches are the reality to which the symbolic lampstands in the tabernacle and the temple pointed forward.

Christ walks among the churches as Lord and Shepherd, just as God's cloud of glory condescended to dwell in the tabernacle and the temple, which had their lampstands (Exod. 25:31-40; 1 Kings 7:49). God's character as light (1 John 1:5) is supremely manifested in Christ (John 1:4-5; 8:12; 9:5; Acts 26:13), but is also reflected in various ways in his creation: in fiery angels (10:1; Ezek. 1:13; Dan. 10:5-6?), in natural light (21:23; Gen. 1:3), in the temple lampstands, in the churches, and in each individual person (Matt. 5:14-16). Christ thus presents the pattern in which the destiny of the whole universe is summed up (Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:16-17). Because all things hold together in Christ (Col. 1:17), the Trinitarian imagery of 1:12-20 and 4:1-5:14 forms a foundation in subtle ways for the whole of Revelation Because the Trinity is deeply mysterious, the imagery of Revelation has inexhaustible profundity.

Now let us look at some of the details. Christ is described as **someone "like a son of man"** because he fulfills the vision of Daniel 7:13-14. Daniel sees in the distant future a mysterious, exalted human figure who brings to an end the succession of godless, pagan world-dominating kingdoms: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. What was distant for Daniel has now become reality through Christ's death and resurrection (1:18). Christ has received the promised dominion from the Ancient of Days. The effects of his authority are still working out in history. With the justice and discrimination of a judge he weighs the good and bad among the seven churches, and promises suitable rewards and punishments (chapters 2-3). He has the key role in judgment not only for the churches but for the world at large (6:1; 19:11-21).

The special term used for Christ's **long robe** probably suggests a priestly robe, underlining his purity. Purity is required of churches and Christians if they are to remain in his presence (1:13, 20; 2:5). Purity is the foundation for the rectitude of his judgments. As priest he takes care of the lampstands in God's temple.

The **sash** corresponds to Daniel 10:5 and to the sash or waistband of the high priest (Exod. 28:8), a normal piece of men's clothing. What is striking is that it is **golden**, signifying the beauty, wealth, and exalted status of the one who wears it. The wealth of human beings is only a puny reflection of the majesty of God.

White head and hair correspond to the white of the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7:9, suggesting both purity and the wisdom associated with old age. Note that Christ shares the attributes of the Father, who is the reference point in the earlier passage in Daniel 7:9-10.

His eyes blaze with **fire**, as in Daniel 10:6. Fire accompanies the appearance of God (theophany) in many cases in the Old Testament (Dan. 7:9; Ezek. 1:4, 13, 27; Exod. 19:18; 3:2; Gen. 15:17; etc.). His eyes can see the secrets of human hearts (2:18, 23; Heb. 4:12-13), burning away sin and impurity.

His **feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace**. The purifying power of the fiery eyes carries over its associations to the feet, which have a fiery glow. Gleaming metal picks up Old Testament bright metal appearing in the presence of God, as in Ezekiel 1:4, 7, 27; Daniel 10:6. There seem to be a multiplicity of vague allusions. Bronze is a harder and more ordinary metal than gold or silver, and finds a frequent use in weapons. An association with judgment and war is suggested. The brightness and the association with fire again suggest judgment, but accompanied by intense purity, beauty, and glory. See also 2:18.

The picture of Christ achieves its effect, not by limiting itself to some specific attribute of God, but by suggesting connections to many attributes, and by showing Christ as the original of which earthly splendors and earthly judges are only pale imitations.

Christ's voice like **the sound of rushing waters**, repeats the theme of loud, authoritative voices from God, as in 1:10. Loud sounds occur in Daniel 10:6; Ezekiel 1:24; Exodus 19:16, 19.

In Christ's **right hand** were **seven stars**, signifying **the angels of the seven churches** (1:20). He has control over the whole heavenly host, of which these angels are a representative sample.

A **sword** (verse 16) comes out of his mouth. It signifies the sword-like capability of Christ's powerful word to bring punishment or reward (see 19:15, 21; Heb. 4:12-13; John 12:47-50; Matt. 7:24-27; Isa. 11:4).

His face was like the sun, continuing to emphasize the brilliant, bright majesty of Christ's appearance. The theme appears in 21:22-25; Isaiah 60:1-3, 19-20; Revelation 10:1; Ezekiel 1:27.

John falls down, overwhelmed (v. 17). Christ is our friend, according to John 15:14-15. But he is more than a mere friend: he is awesome in majesty, power, and purity. Too many Christians in our generation have only seen Christ as a "buddy," losing sight of his majesty. Revelation gives a strong, bracing antidote. C. S. Lewis captures something of the untameability of this picture in a famous passage from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, in which a lion represents the Christ figure:

"Aslan a man!" said Mr Beaver sternly. "Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-beyond-the-sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion."

"Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs Beaver; "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

"I'm longing to see him," said Peter, "even if I do feel frightened when it comes to the point."

"That's right, son of Adam," said Mr Beaver, bringing his paw down on the table with a crash that made all the cups and saucers rattle. "And so you shall. Word has been sent that you are to meet him, to-morrow if you can, at the Stone Table."

Christ says to John, "Do not be afraid" (v. 17), even as he says to us throughout Revelation. Whatever may happen to you, I am who I am, and I have the victory.

Christ is **the First and the Last**, Lord over the beginning and the end, just as is God the Father (22:13; 1:8; Isa. 41:4; 44:6; 48:12). He is also Lord over the middle point, in that his death and resurrection as a middle point have turned back the power of death not only for himself as a single man, but for all those people who belong to him. His possession of the keys of death anticipates

20:14, 21:4. At the consummation death shall be no more. The triumph through this one man then extends in its perfection to us, so that it becomes the permanent triumph of the entire new world (2:8; 5:9-10; 20:4-5; 22:1). Analogously, because of his transcendent authority Christ is able to give the promise of victory over death and Hades to the church (Matt. 16:18-19). See 3:7.

1:19 suggests a threefold division of Revelation into past (1:12-16; **what you have seen**), present (2:1-3:22; **what is now**), and future (4:1-22:5). Note the similar wording in 1:19c and 4:1 But the division is only a rough one, since each portion contains some references to all three periods.

The Messages to the Seven Churches, 2:1-3:22

Christ shows care for the churches by addressing each one according to its needs, with encouragement, rebuke, exhortation, and promise. He shows detailed knowledge of their condition ("I know"). Each of the messages contain allusions to circumstances or traditions of the city, some of which we are doubtless still unaware of. At the same time, all the churches are caught up in a universal calling to faithfulness and endurance until the promises reach their fulfillment in the heavenly Jerusalem. Their struggles contrast with the peace and satisfaction pictured in 21:1-22:5. The exhortations are reinforced in all but one case (Laodicea) by an opening allusion to some element of the majestic vision of 1:12-20. The exhortations therefore have universal bearing.

Moreover, the churches in view number exactly seven, the symbolic number of completeness. They stand for all the churches of that time and ours. In fact, the triumphs and failures and struggles of these churches are a kind of miniature catalogue of the sorts of things that we can expect to find in other churches throughout history. (But some interpreters have erroneously assigned the seven churches to seven successive ages of church history in order, a procedure for which Revelation gives no warrant.) According to God's point of view, not all churches are equally healthy. Their faithfulness or laziness or complacency or tolerance of false doctrine are important to him, and make a difference both in how they should respond and how they are judged. We likewise need Christ-like discernment, illumined by the Spirit and by these examples, if we are to evaluate our own church situation accurately and respond faithfully.

Each message has the same basic form:

1. Addressee: "to the angel of the church in … write."

2. Identification of Christ, alluding back to his majesty displayed in 1:12-20: "These are the words of …."

3. Claim of knowledge: "I know."

4. Evaluation: rebukes and/or commendations.

5. Promise or threat: usually "I will …."

6. Promise to "him who overcomes."

7. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Elements 6 and 7 can occur in reverse order, and element 5 can occur mixed in with element 4.

Each message in also distinctive, corresponding to the distinctive character and circumstances of the churches. We may summarize the differences in the following table.

The Seven Churches

Church	Character of Christ	Strength	Problem	Duty	Promise
Ephesus	authority	doctrinal zeal	lost love	repent	tree of life
Smyrna	giving life	spiritually rich		suffer for Christ	Freedom from death
Pergamum	warrior against sin	holding fast	false teaching, immorality	repent	Spiritual significance
Thyatira	searching heart	love, service	false teaching, immorality (Jezebel)	repudiate Jezebel	rule over nations
Sardis	source of Spirit	a few faithful saints	spiritually dead	awake!	White robe (honor)
Philadelphia	opening door	keeping the word	little strength	continue	Secure dwelling
Laodicea	true witness		worthless	admit need; receive from Christ	Fellowship

Who are the "angels" of the churches? The underlying Greek word can mean simply messenger. So some people have seen here messengers who physically carried the document and delivered it to the churches. Others have seen here the pastors of the churches, in their capacity as message bearers of God. But the visionary context of the Book of Revelation indicates that Revelation has actual angels in view. Specific angels have evidently been given responsibility with respect to specific churches, in a manner analogy to the attachment of heavenly "princes" to specific nations in Daniel 10:12-11:1. God's heavenly presence is the power-center for the entire universe. The heavenly and earthly realms therefore interlock, and situations and processes in heaven have correspondences in mysterious fashion to processes on earth. Thus the same messages go both to heavenly angels and corresponding church in earthly locations.

The Message to Ephesus, 2:1-7

The church in Ephesus receives a mixed evaluation. It has commendable zeal for sound doctrine and the rejection of false doctrine (vv. 2, 6). But like many a modern student with doctrinal focus, it is short on love. The godly response is to see the failing and repent.

Otherwise, Christ threatens to **remove your lampstand** (v. 5). He alludes to the fact that the city of Ephesus had had to change location because of the gradual silting up of its river, the Cayster. It had been "removed" from earlier locations. By analogy, Christ threatens to dislocate and restructure the church unless she repents.

We know of the **Nicolaitans** only from here and later commentaries. They were a heretical group, probably holding views similar to the teaching of Balaam and Jezebel (see 2:14-15, 20). Christ **hates** their practices (v. 6). Their deeds are immoral and impure, in contrast to the purity of Christ, and this contrast makes them bad enough. But by teaching and enticing others, the Nicolaitans spread soul-threatening contagion and spiritual disaster to others as well. Likewise in our days we need to take seriously the evil of false doctrine and its practices.

Christ addresses **him who overcome**s in this and parallel verses to the other churches. He promises to faithful saints participation in all the aspects of the new Jerusalem that is to appear (2:11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; cf. 21:1-22:5). The **tree of life**, which appears in 22:2, symbolizes eternal abundant life in the presence of God (see John 10:10; 14:6; 4:14; 5:40).

The Message to Smyrna, 2:8-11

Smyrna is one of two churches for whom Christ gives encouragement and not rebuke. Smyrna faced serious persecution, including even death (v. 10). Christ's assurance begins with underlining the fact that he is victorious over death (v. 8).

Non-Christian Jews may have been trying to get Christians in trouble by claiming that the church was not another Jewish sect, but an essentially non-Jewish group. If so, in the eyes of the Roman government they could like all Gentiles be required to show political loyalty to the government through participating in emperor worship. If they refused, as they must, they could be executed for treason. (See Introduction: Date.)

Such a situation would explain the phrase **synagogue of Satan**. The Jewish synagogue in Smyrna was composed not of all Jews in the area, nor of people who had never heard of Jesus Christ, but specifically of those who rejected the gospel. (Doubtless other Jews had responded favorably to the gospel and joined the church.) The rejecting Jews professed to worship God, but their opposition to Christians showed that they were in fact in the power of Satanic darkness (2 Cor. 4:4). Behind human opposition stands the more fundamental opposition of Satan, who seeks by all means to destroy the church (12:13-13:1).

Like others under persecution, the Smyrnans must persevere (1:9), **be faithful**. The city of Smyrna prided itself on faithfulness to Rome. But the only loyalty that matters ultimately is not loyalty to Rome but to Christ.

Christ promises **the crown of life**. The thematic connections go in several directions. Christ himself, as the one risen from the dead (v. 8; 1:18), is the ultimate source of true life, life from the dead. The promise also answers deftly the threat of persecution involving death. In addition, Christ

links his claims with the life of the city as a whole. Smyrna's goddess Cybele is pictured in coins with a crown consisting of a city battlement. The Smyrnan buildings on Mt. Pagos were said to look like a crown. Over against these claims, Jesus offers to impart the true crown.

The Message to Pergamum, 2:12-17

The church in Pergamum has borne persecution well (v. 13), but fails to reject false teachers (vv. 14-15). Taking up the fight for truth imitates Christ's zeal for truth (v. 16).

Christ describes their location as **where Satan has his throne**. Pergamum possessed the oldest temple in Asia Minor devoted to emperor worship. But other, subtler Satanic influences are present, as we learn from the mention of Balaam and the Nicolaitans (cf. 2:6). Balaam (Num 22:5) gave Balak advice leading to the incident in Numbers 25:1-4, where Israel went astray after false gods and practiced sexual immorality. Similarly, Jezebel (2:20) and other professing Christians in the seven churches were indulging in pleasures offered by their pagan environment (see 17:1-19:10). The Nicolaitans, the same group as in 2:6, were probably a heretical group with teaching similar to what Balaam represented.

Christ's promises to the faithful again contain multiple allusions. The **hidden manna** (v. 17) perhaps alludes to the manna kept preserved in the most holy place of the tabernacle (Exod. 16:33-35; Heb. 9:4). Christ promises to nourish the faithful with an unfailing supply of heavenly, spiritual food (see John 6:32-58). He also promises **a white stone**, recalling all the references in Revelation to white as a symbol for purity (e.g., 7:13; 19:14). Interestingly, pink granite dominated the buildings in Pergamum, because it was available locally. But in the ruins there one also finds special inscription stones of white marble, which would have had to be imported. These white stones gained in value not only from the superior beauty but from the trouble that people had to take to acquire them. Over against the prestige attaching to earthly displays, Christ promises the only prestige that matters—to be known by God. He thus gives a fitting motive to people who were in danger of being seduced into illicit mixing with paganism and its pleasures.

The Message to Thyatira, 2:18-29

The church at Thyatira has the opposite problem from the one in Ephesus. Love is strong here (v. 19), but not doctrinal purity (vv. 20-23).

As usual, Christ singles out those characteristics of his most relevant to the church's situation. The Son of God has eyes **like blazing fire** to search the heart (v. 23), and feet of power to trample the wicked (cf. Isa. 63:3, 6). The feet are **like burnished bronze**. Links extend to 1:15, and from there to Old Testament appearances of God that have bright metallic luster (Ezek. 1:4, 7, 27; Dan. 10:6). There is also a suggestive link with the circumstances of the city of Thyatira. Thyatira had a guild of bronze workers famous throughout the region, and doubtless the whole city prided itself on its unique bronze products. Moreover, the Greek word for **burnished bronze** in v. 18 is unique: it occurs only here, in 1:15, and in later commentaries, but nowhere else in all of Greek literature! Why such a rare word? The best guess is that it was the trade name for the special kind of bronze produced in Thyatira. The Thyatiran guild carefully guarded a secret for a special way of making the metal, so that no one could get this specially prized kind of product except from Thyatira. No one, that is, except Christ. In him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3).

Thyatiran secrets about bronze are only a tiny echo of his wisdom and uniqueness. We have here an indirect rebuke of those who lust after secret knowledge, apart from Christ (v. 24).

The leader of the deviant, secret "knowledge" in the church of Thyatira is a woman called "Jezebel," after the Jezebel of 1 Kings 16:31; 19:1-2; 21:5-26; 2 Kings 9:30-37. Like the Old Testament Jezebel this woman seduced people to sexual immorality and idolatry, two major forms of indulgence in pagan Asia Minor. See 14:8 and 17:1-19:10. She may have argued that those with her secret knowledge (v. 24) could see that an idol is nothing (cf. 1 Cor. 10:19), and that for people with deep "spiritual" knowledge the use of the body no longer made a difference. Her message was welcome because it made it much easier to mix with pagans in business and in social affairs, where food dedicated to idols and prostitution might be present. Sin can always come up with excuses to do what it wants, to do what is convenient and comfortable. It may take a prophetically penetrating criticism like John's to bring people up short. Or it may take even more: the hand of God in punishment (vv. 22-23). Though it may be painful, this punishment is for the good of God's children (Heb. 12:5-13).

Christ promises **authority over the nations** (v. 26) to people who must have felt puny and powerless in worldly ways. They did not enjoy the fame of Thyatiran bronze workers, or privileged access to secrets of worldly power, or smooth social relations with pagan idolaters. But they will inherit what is a much superior privilege. They **dash** the nations to **pieces**. It is not wanton destruction, but fulfillment of the plan of God set forth in Psalm 2:9. Specifically the *rebellion* of nations against Christ receives God's wrath and destruction. All rebellion is forcibly wiped out. And New Testament Christians now know that the destruction of rebellion takes two very different forms: repentance and faith in Christ crucify the old rebellion; or the force of the fire of hell puts out the rebellion of the unrepentant.

Christ promises **the morning star** (v. 28) to the victors. Elsewhere he is himself the morning star (22:16). The brightness of a star suggests connections with the promise that churches and Christians will show forth light that reflects the original light of Christ (1:13, 16). The morning star, Venus, is the brightest star-like object in the night sky. The prominence of the morning star seems also to suggest an answer to the worldly puniness of Christians, indicating that they have weight and significance through Christ, and in the coming age their status will be made manifest.

The Message to Sardis, 3:1-6

The churches in Sardis and Laodicea receive the most severe rebukes. Sardis is dead, though still with a chance of reviving life (v. 2). And a few at Sardis remain faithful (v. 4). But the situation is all the more dangerous because the Sardisian Christians are deluded about their true state (v. 1). They are unconcerned. The lesson is devastatingly relevant for us. Churches can bear the name of church, and have a certain external reputation, when it is doubtful whether they are truly churches at all. The essence of a church does not consist in programs or buildings or past achievements or reputation or institutional greatness or in formal doctrinal correctness, but in life. This spiritual life comes only through fellowship with the living Christ, and is demonstrated through the seriousness of repentance and obedience. Christ reminds Sardis that he has **the seven spirits of God**. Only through receiving the Holy Spirit, represented by the figure of seven spirits (1:4), do we have life in God.

The church at Sardis once did have life (v. 3). Declension is a real possibility, then and now.

Christ calls first for repentance. But in his zeal he is prepared to take stronger measures if repentance is not forthcoming. **I will come like a thief** (v. 3). The seemly impregnable fortress of Sardis had in wartime been captured twice by surprise, probably at night. Christ warns that a similar experience will befall the church, unless they wake up.

Promises of purity, vindication, and reward come first of all to the "few" at Sardis who remain faithful (v. 4). But these few become an incentive to everyone to come back to a lost spirituality. Essentially the same promise comes to everyone **who overcomes** (v. 5). Life returns in fullness, as is fittingly symbolized by **the book of life**, the heavenly roster of those destined to new life (see 13:8; 17:8; John 6:39).

The Message to Philadelphia, 3:7-13

Philadelphia, like Smyrna, receives commendation. They have only **little strength** (v. 8), but they have **kept my word**. Like the Smyrnan church (2:9), they are being opposed by non-Christian Jews (v. 9). Christ holds out promises of victory and security to encourage them to persevere.

Christ **holds the key of David** (v. 7), representing power of opening and shutting, analogous to the keys of death and Hades in 1:18. Christ's authority is a surpassing fulfillment of the "key of David" meditation in Isa. 22:20-25 (note Rev. 3:7). What Eliakim or any other saint of the Old Testament could not do, Christ has done. His reliability and strength are such that one can rest on him all the weight of the host of redeemed people and their destiny.

The key that Christ holds represents his authority to set before Philadelphia **an open door** (v. 8). The city of Philadelphia stood at the entrance point of a road leading further into the interior of Asia Minor. Possibly, then, Christ says that he is opening the way for the church to evangelize the interior. But we cannot be certain, since nothing else in the context suggests a focus on evangelism. More likely, then, the open door symbolizes freedom to approach God himself (compare 4:1). As a result of this fundamental privilege, the church has freedom to grow and develop spiritually, in spite of the opposition of Jews and the threat of trial (v. 10).

As in 2:9, the synagogue of non-Christian Jews is called **a synagogue of Satan**, not only because they were rejecting the truth of Christ, but because they actively opposed and hindered the church (see on 2:9)

The "little strength" of the Philadelphian church tempted it to feel insecure and terrified. Christ promises security in a variety of ways. First, in response to fear of trial, he promises to keep them from **the hour of trial that is going to come** ... (v. 10). The most likely reference is to the various trials and punishments that God sends in later chapters (6-11; 16-18; 19:11-21). These trials come on **those who live on the earth**. Here as elsewhere in Revelation the earth dwellers are not simply everyone physically present in the body, but those characterized by worldliness in spirit (6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 17:2). We might say that their citizenship is on the earth, as opposed to Christians with citizenship in heaven (Phil. 3:20; Heb. 12:22-24). As in 9:4, God knows Christians as his own, seals them, and protects them. We are not immune from normal ups and downs in circumstances (Phil. 4:11-13) nor from persecutions (Rev. 2:10, 13; 2 Tim. 3:12-13; Acts 14:22; 1

Thess. 3:3-5). But we are protected as children in the Father's hand (cf. Rom. 8:28-39; John 10:27-30).

Second, Christ promises to make us **a pillar in the temple**. Philadelphia had suffered from earthquakes, so that people were afraid to live any longer within the older city limits, and were building houses scattered over the surrounding area. The insecurity to the city as a whole makes the promise of security and stability particularly pointed.

Third, Christ promises the writing of the name of God on the faithful (v. 12). The name of God is not only a sign of intimacy, being a member of his family, but here in Revelation a sign of ownership and protection, as we see in 14:1 compared to 13:16. It is equivalent to the seal on the forehead in 9:4 and 7:1-8 (cf. Hag. 2:23; Mal. 3:17-18; Ezek. 9:4-11; Exod. 28:36; 19:5-6).

The Message to Laodicea, 3:14-22

The church at Laodicea receives no commendations but only rebukes. Their fundamental problem is complacency, self-satisfaction, and self-reliance. They think that they are rich and well-supplied in everything (v. 17). Ironically, this claim exposes them to the greater danger and poverty, because they have no sense of their need to admit powerlessness and helplessness, to turn to Christ, and receive from him true riches and healing. Christ shocks them into reality by declaring that their real state is the opposite of what they pridefully thought.

Christ reinforces his evaluation by reminding them of the reliability of his words. As the faithful and true witness (v. 14), his word is more accurate and telling than their complacent self-evaluation. Christ is the **Amen**, the same Hebrew word translated as *truly* or *verily* in Jesus' sayings, "Truly, truly, I say to you." (The NIV typically translates by "I tell you the truth.") He is the Truth, as in John 14:6. Hence he tells the painful and unpleasant truth to the Laodiceans.

Christ is also **the beginning of God's creation**. Some translations have the words, "The ruler of God's creation" (e.g., NIV). But this is a less likely meaning. The thought is similar to 1:5, where Christ is "the firstborn from the dead" (see Col. 1:18). By his resurrection he has inaugurated or begun the new creation.1 Only in and through him will the Laodiceans receive spiritual renewal now, and the resurrection of the body when the new heaven and the new earth come.

Christ begins his evaluation of the Laodiceans by saying that they **are neither cold nor hot**. Laodicea's water supply had to be provided from a distant source through pipes. The resulting water was lukewarm and barely drinkable. By contrast, the neighboring town of Hierapolis had medicinal hot springs, and neighboring Colossae was supplied by a cold mountain stream. Christ urges the church to be refreshing (cold) or medicinally healing (hot), rather than like the Laodicean water supply. Be able to minister in some valuable way, rather than being worthless, as lukewarm water is! His message must have been particularly meaningful and piercing to the Laodiceans, because, proud as they were of their supposed riches and self-sufficiency, they daily experienced the disgusting and inferior character of their water, in contrast to the water of the neighboring cities. Laodiceans felt like splitting out their water, and so Christ uses the same shocking image of splitting to express the worthlessness of their complacency.

Moreover, the problems of the church in Laodicea echoed the problems associated with the whole city. The entire city of Laodicea prided itself on its self-sufficiency. After earthquakes caused

considerable damage in Laodicea, Roman authorities in the larger region were willing to help with repair and restoration. But Laodicea refused the help and boasted that it had recovered entirely through its own resources and powers.

In respond to the Laodiceans' need, Christ promises gold, white clothes, and salve. The gold clearly comes from Christ's own transcendent resources, as we are reminded by the gold and the refining fire in 1:13, 15. It answers the Laodicean boast of being rich in itself. The white clothes link up ironically to another pride of Laodicea. Laodicea was well known throughout the region as a source of black (!) wool. Moreover, Laodicea was also famous for its guild of physicians. Certain references to ways of healing the eyes seem to suggest that this guild of physicians may have had produced a special eye salve claiming to have healing properties. Like the special bronze from Thyatira, the eye salve from Laodicea would have been the pride of the city. But who really has the healing powers that matter? Once again, Christ as Lord of all creation and redeemer of the world has the healing of which any earthly healing is only a poor shadow.

Christ's message, so antithetical to what the Laodiceans expected, would have been hard to swallow. So Christ affectionately reminds them that love motivates his rebuke (v. 19). He desires not to alienate or offend them, but to bring repentance so that they may have fellowship with him (v. 20). He is eager to extend that fellowship, and all the glorious riches and healing that come with it, if only they will hear his voice and admit the need. He promises to eat with them, alluding to the experience of fellowship with Christ expressed in the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:17-34). In the Lord's Supper the Lord comes and feeds us with himself, as indeed he does through the fellowship that we have throughout our life (John 6:25-59). Revelation 3:20 has often been used as an evangelistic text, but in its original context it is a promise directed to complacent Christians, who need to confess their dependence and restore fellowship with the Master.

God's Throne Room, 4:1-5:14

God appears in a beautiful scene of worship as magnificent king of heaven and earth. He is surrounded by angelic courtiers (cf. 1 Kings 22:19; Job 1:6; 2:1; Ps. 89:6-7; Ezek. 1; Dan. 7:9-10). His rule was established in creation (4:11), is exercised in the entire panorama of history (6:1-22:5), is consummated through the Lamb (5:1-14; 22:1), and is celebrated in songs of praise (see on 1:6). Revelation is preeminently a book about God and his greatness. The secrets of history and of spiritual conflict center on God himself. The whole universe is destined to be filled with the glory of God (21:22-23), with the goodness of God (22:1-5), and with his praise (5:13). Hence the pattern for the outcome of all history is revealed in miniature here (Matt. 6:10). (See Introduction: Interpretation.)

When God's people are beset by temptation or persecution, a revelation of God's own character and glory is the best remedy. His power guarantees the final victory, his justice guarantees vindication of the right, his goodness and magnificence guarantee blessing and comfort. The blood of the Lamb demonstrates that solid redemption has already been accomplished. Even in the midst of trials and persecutions, God is still the ruler. He controls all things.

John's vision is a little like an experience of going to an airport control tower. At a busy airport, a casual observer looking out the windows may see only mass confusion. Planes, vehicles, and baggage are going every which way. What does it all mean? If, however, the observer is escorted up

to the control tower, he sees the overall plan of the airport, he hears the crucial decisions made, and the directives go out in order to keep all the pieces carefully choreographed to execute the plans of the controllers. Suddenly, the goings-on down below make sense. So with John. Through his vision we are transported into the "control tower" for the entire universe. From this vantage point, through understanding the Controller and his plans, things fall into place. And even if they sometimes escape our comprehension, we know the One who does comprehend it all. His execution cannot and will not fail!

In the Old Testament the tabernacle (Exod. 25-40) and the temple (1 Kings 5-7; 2 Chron. 2-4) were images or shadows of God's throne room in heaven (Exod. 25:40; Heb. 8:5-6; 9:1-14). John sees the heavenly original rather than an earthly copy. Revelation thus fittingly contains many allusions to the temple (3:12; 7:15; 11:19; 14:15, 17; 15:5-16:1; 16:17; 21:22) and to elements within it: for example, the lamps (4:5; cf. 1:12), the living creatures like cherubim (4:6-9), incense and prayer (5:8), songs of praise like those offered by the Levitical singers in the Old Testament (4:8, 11; 5:9-13; 1 Chron. 16), a sacrifice (5:6, 9), the ark of the covenant (11:19), the altar (11:1), and the outer court (11:2).

The tabernacle and the temple were centers for worship. In this respect also they were images of God's presence in heaven. The history of the universe, from creation to consummation, finds its significance in worship. God is glorious. Those who know and see him cannot but stand in awe of him, and worship him with profound gratitude, joy, and satisfaction. "You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Ps. 16:11). Because God is who he is, he is not only the Creator of earthly pleasures, but the very fountainhead of all joy. Creatures find their consummate fulfillment, the meaning and full satisfaction of their existence, in worshiping, serving, and adoring him. God created the heavens and the earth, "very good" (Gen. 1:31). It was very good because its reflected and displayed something of the glory if its Maker (cf. Isa. 6:3). But the consummation displays his glory in a yet fuller and incomprehensibly richer fashion (Rev. 21:23). God's victory will surpasses all expectations (Eph. 3:20); we now grasp it only dimly (1 Cor. 13:9-12). Thus, theologically and biblically speaking, the throne room of God in Revelation 4 represents the heart of the universe, the heart of meaning, the heart of history. Renewal to our lives comes through worship, through adoring this God who created us and saw fit to redeem us through the blood of the Lamb. Revelation renews us, not so much from particular instructions about particular future events, but from showing us God, who will bring to pass all events in his own time and his own way.

God and his Angelic Court, 4:1-11

A door stands open in heaven to give John access to heaven and to the vision that he will see. A voice invites him up, the same voice as in 1:10, the voice of Christ. It is always through Christ alone that we have access to God, and the same is true of John. **Come up here** indicates that John ascends into heaven, whether in the body or out of it (2 Cor. 12:2-3). Moses went up to Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:3, 20), and Paul was caught up to heaven (2 Cor. 12:2) to receive special revelations. Ezekiel saw heaven opened (Ezek. 1:1). Likewise with John. Though the experience of John in unique, God gives the description of this vision to us as well. He thus enables the whole church of God to have access to the heavenly sphere. In this sense, then, we can through appropriating the vision share in the benefits of John's experience.

The content of John's vision is **what must take place after this**. The language is similar to 1:19 and refers to the whole of 4:1-22:5. Because God is in control and has foreordained the entire course of history (Eph. 1:11; Isa. 46:10), he can tell beforehand the character of the entire age leading up to the Second Coming. The guarantee from God is reassuring for believers who must face hardship, persecution, or even death.

John is **in the Spirit** (v. 2). As in 1:10, 17:3, and 21:10, the Spirit brings him to the location from which he will see the vision. And more broadly, the Spirit supervises and controls the entire visionary process, as in Ezekiel 2:2; etc. The Spirit is the mediator of all prophetic revelations, and the mediator of our understanding of spiritual things as well (1 Cor. 2:9-16).

At the center of the vision is God's throne in heaven, representing his kingly rule. God's sovereignty is a fundamental theme throughout Revelation. As the vision unfolds, we find that God is surrounded by successive circles of servants: four living creatures, 24 elders, and myriads of angels (5:11). God is at the central location, a fitting representation of the fact that he is the all-important, all-determining spiritual center and power center for the universe.

Someone sits on the throne. But the details of God's appearance are not described, reminding us that his greatness always exceeds our grasp. (See 1:12-20.)

What is the meaning of the jasper, carnelian, and the rainbow like an emerald? It is important to keep in mind the big picture. God's appearance far surpasses the splendor of the court of any earthly king. The precious stones display his wealth, his beauty, and his glory. "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). Fittingly, his throne displays beautiful, multicolored light. The jasper is white or translucent (21:11). Carnelian is red, and emerald is green. One is reminded of the jewel-like splendor of the new Jerusalem (21:11; 21:19-20), the high priest's breastpiece (Exod. 28:17-20), and some Old Testament theophanies (Exod. 24:10; Ezek. 1:16, 22, 26, 28). In ancient times it was not easy for an earthly king to obtain precious stones except through international trade (cf. Ezek. 28:13, concerning the international trading city, Tyre). Hence, indirectly the presence of these precious stones underlines the international reach of God's kingship.

God is himself the ultimate source and supply of splendor and beauty. His splendor is partly reflected in the things that he has made: the brightness and colors of sun, of heavenly bodies, of rainbow, of precious jewels (cf. Isa. 6:3). The church and its members are in turn to reflect his splendor through the holiness of their lives (Rev. 21:19-20; 19:8; 22:11; Matt. 5:14-16; 1 Pet. 3:3-5).

We may discern a general pattern in the way that God's glory is reflected and displayed. We may start with the core idea of God's kingship, represented by his throne. God as the great King rules over the whole universe, assisted by a surrounding court of heavenly beings (angels). Man is made in the image of God. Adam as a subordinate king, under God, rules over the earth, assisted by his fellow human beings. In all these areas the rule of God is reflected. Now we may transfer these ideas into the analogous area of God's *presence*, his dwelling place, and his appearance. We may start with the heavenly sphere, where God rules, assisted by angelic beings. First, God dwells eternally in himself, through the mystery of the indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity (John 14:11). Revelation does not use explicitly the language of indwelling, but presupposes the reality of the Trinity through the fact that God and the Lamb share their one throne (22:1) and their name (22:13; 1:8). Second, God dwells in the midst of his heavenly courtiers, surrounded by angels (1 Kings

22:19; Dan. 7:10; Ps. 89:6-7; Rev. 4:4-11; 5:11). Third, God dwells in heaven as his particular abode, but so that he fills all things (1 Kings 8:27, 30; Jer. 23:24). In all these spheres God displays his glory. The jewel-like splendor of his magnificence appears in the immediate vicinity of the throne (Rev. 4:3), among the angelic beings (Ezek. 1:16, 22), and in the lights of heaven (Rev. 21:23).

Next, consider the earthly sphere, where man rules over the earth. The high priest as a model of holiness displays what is to be reflected in each human being (Exod. 28:17-20). The jewels of the new Jerusalem show what the church as a corporate body is to reflect (Rev. 21:19-20). And the tabernacle and the temple, as special dwelling places of God on earth, display his glory through their beautiful colors and adornments.

We have traced the idea of jewel-like splendor and beauty through its various reflections in the various spheres. The same could be done with almost any of the aspects of God's appearing. For instance, take the throne in verse 2, symbolizing God's authority and power to rule. The angelic beings around God's throne also sit on thrones (v. 4). They have power to rule that is derivative from and reflecting of God's power. In the universe as a whole, the heavenly lights *rule* over the day and the night (Gen. 1:16). On earth, earthly kings have thrones; they have genuine authority deriving from God (Rom. 13:1-5). All believers have the privilege of rule, not only as sons of Adam (Gen. 1:28), but preeminently as sons of God in Christ, who have been given to sit with him (Eph. 2:6; Rev. 3:21). Finally, in the earthly tabernacle and temple, the ark of the covenant represents the place from which God rules (Exod. 25:22). The ten commandments deposited in the ark represent the central regulations of God's dominion over Israel (Exod. 25:16).

Similarly, the light of God is reflected in all these spheres. God is himself light (1 John 1:5; Rev. 4:5). The angelic beings appear in a brightness reflecting this uncreated brightness of God (Ezek. 1:13; Rev. 10:1). The heavenly lights reflect God's glory (Rev. 21:23). Human beings rewarded for righteousness wear white robes, individually (Rev. 3:4) and corporately (Rev. 19:8). They are light-bearers, like the lampstands in the tabernacle and the temple (1:12, 20; 11:4).

The rainbow encircling the throne (v. 3) reinforces the theme of light, this time with light of many colors, or perhaps a rainbow-like circle of emerald green light. A rainbow similarly appears in Revelation 10:1 and Ezekiel 1:28. The occurrence in Ezekiel alludes in turn to the original promise of the rainbow in Genesis 9:13-16, which signifies God's mercy and forgiveness of sin.

Now what about the 24 elders and their thrones? The heavenly setting suggests that these elders, like the living creatures (v. 6), are angelic beings, courtiers in God's heavenly court, assistants ready to do his bidding or simply to praise his glory. Old Testament scenes involving God and angelic assistants offer a similar picture (1 Kings 22:19; Dan. 7:10; Ps. 89:6-7; Job 1:6; 2:1). Why then are they "elders," and why are there 24?

The term "elders" has suggested to some people that we have here the elders of the church, representing the church in heaven. But in 5:10 the elders speak of the church in the *third* person, "them," indicating that they are distinct from the church. And in 7:13-14 one of the elders performs an explanatory function, such as is typical of angelic beings in this kind of literature (see Introduction: Apocalyptic). They are here called "elders" because age goes with wisdom (cf. Dan. 7:9). Just as an earthly king has wise men to counsel him on important state decisions, so God has superbly wise counselors as his court attendants.

The number 24 is difficult. In 1 Chronicles 24 David organizes the Aaronic priests into 24 divisions. Priests are dedicated servants of God's temple on earth. Likewise, God's dwelling in heaven has its dedicated servants, who must have holiness and consecration to qualify them for service. Thus, the 24 elders as heavenly, angelic beings, correspond to 24 priestly orders of the earthly Aaronic priesthood.

But there is something more to be said. As we have observed, heavenly reality is reflected on earth. Are there then priests now living on earth, who may mirror the action of this angelic order of priests? The church on earth is to praise and serve God with the same purity and devotion as this angelic order displays. The church is founded on the 12 apostles (21:14), who correspond to the 12 tribes of Israel (21:12). Hence, with some justification, people have suggested that 24 represents the people of God of both the Old and New Testament, 12 tribes of Israel from the Old and 12 apostles from the New. The elders are angelic beings, and hence not identical with the church. But they and the church are still images of one another.

The elders have thrones, white robes, and crowns of gold, all of which reflect aspects of God on his throne.

The lightning and thunder (v 5) exhibit God's power in a manner analogous to Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:16-19) and other divine appearances (8:5; 11:19; 16:18; Ps. 18:11-15; Ezek. 1:4). He thus reminds us of the power of his voice (1:15; see on 1:10) and the final shaking of creation still to come (11:19; 21:1; Heb. 12:25-27). Lightning and loud noise accompany God's appearing in judgment in 8:5; 11:19; 16:18. Note the loud noise or voice in 1:10, 15; 5:2, 11-12; 6:1, 10; 7:2, 10; 8:13; 10:3; 11:12, 15; 12:10; 14:2, 7, 9, 15, 18; 16:1, 17; 18:2; 19:1, 6, 17; 21:3.

The **seven lamps** allude to Zech. 4:2, 6, and Rev. 1:12. **Seven spirits** refer to the sevenfold fullness of the Holy Spirit, as in 1:12. The light of the Holy Spirit is the original light of which the seven-branched lampstand of Exodus 25:31-40 was a copy. The similarities with 1:12 suggest that the seven churches, as a true temple of God, are to give out light reflecting the very presence of God through his Spirit.

What is the **sea of glass** (v. 6)? See 15:2; Exod. 24:10. This imagery might suggest a number of associations. The parallel verse in 15:2 calls to mind the waters of the Red Sea. The defeat of Pharaoh and the pushing back of the waters foreshadowed God's final victory over evil (Isa. 51:9-11). If so, the sea of glass pictures waters utterly subdued under God's power. Moreover, the extent and beauty of the crystal-like sea, when taken together with the precious stones in 4:3 and 21:18-21, suggest the magnificence and preciousness of God's throne. The numerous parallels elsewhere with the temple might suggest that this sea is the heavenly counterpart of the sea in Solomon's temple (1 Kings 7:23-25). Finally, the picture of heavenly water might simply suggest the fact that God faithfully supplies water from heaven (Deut. 11:11). Which of these various allusions shall we choose? Perhaps all or nearly all should be absorbed together. It is consistent with the style of Revelation to weave together a multitude of Old Testament images.

The **four living creatures**, like the 24 elders, form a circle of angelic beings serving in God's throneroom. In the Ancient Near East kings' thrones or palaces often had statues of winged lions or winged bulls that stood as guardians of the king's presence. In the Bible cherubim function as both guardians of God's holiness (Gen. 3:24; Exod. 25:117-22; 26:31) and chariot-bearers of his throne (1

Chron. 28:18; Ps. 18:10). The four living creatures in Revelation are reminiscent of the living creatures or cherubim in Ezekiel 1 and 10 and the seraphim in Isaiah 6. The cherubim in the Old Testament are closely associated with God's chariot, going with the swiftness of the wind (Ps. 18:10). They are, as it were, the heavenly original of which earthly winds are an image. They are four in number, corresponding to the four winds of heaven in the four directions of the compass (Zech. 6:5; Rev. 7:1). Their eyes, seeing in every direction (v. 6), mirror the all-seeing eyes of God (1:14; Prov. 15:3; 2 Chron. 16:9).

The living creatures are respectively like a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle. The living creatures in Ezekiel 1 each have four faces, of a lion, an ox, a man, an eagle. The list is the same, but the creatures in Ezekiel are all identical, with four faces each, whereas the ones in Revelation are different, each with only one face. So are these creatures in Revelation distinct from or substantially identical with the ones in Ezekiel? Revelation constantly utilizes earlier Scripture, but uses it creatively, in new configurations. Any vision of God and his throneroom is less like a photograph than an artistic impression. It is a *vision*, which symbolizes rather than photographs the realities that it presents (cf. Num. 12:6-8). Symbolization shows us the meaning, rather than merely the physical appearance. But symbolization also warns us that we never fathom to the bottom who God is. Yes, these are the heavenly beings of Ezekiel 1; but in a new configuration, so that we do not exhaustive understand.

Why the four faces, lion, ox, man, and eagle? It is impossible to say for certain. But most likely they continue the theme of imaging: created things display something of the glory of God. Among earthly creatures, the lion is the greatest and fiercest of the wild animals, the ox the strongest of the domestic animals, the eagle the most majestic of birds, and man the ruler over all animals. God is the Original, the great and strong and majestic ruler over all. His heavenly assistants reflect his attributes. And these heavenly models in turn are reflected in what God has created on earth, not only in the creation of human beings but of animals as well. We may often admire and be fascinated by the capacities and skills and strengths that God has given to earthly animals. How much more it is so with respect to awesome heavenly beings, and how much more of God himself! The heavenly beings even now praise God with reverence and eloquence (4:8). Likewise, the destiny of earthly beings, both man and beast, is to join in praise (5:13-14).

The four living creatures have **six wings**, like the seraphim of Isaiah 6:2, whereas Ezekiel's living creatures have four wings apiece (Ezek. 1:6). The variation again shows the creativity and flexibility in this new vision.

The four living creatures utter a paean of praise for God's holiness (v. 9), like the "Holy, holy, holy" of the seraphim in Isaiah 6:3. Here we are at the heart of God's presence. The Israelite earthly tabernacle and temple had an outer court, a holy place, and a most holy place (literally, holy of holies; Exod. 26:34). These represented different degrees of holiness in the approach to God. Only ceremonially clean Israelites were to enter the outer court. Only priests could enter the holy place. Only the high priest could enter the most holy place, only once a year, with special provisions for cleansing (Lev. 16; Heb. 9:7). But all this arrangement, impressive as it was, was only a shadow of God's heavenly presence (Heb. 9:11-12, 23-28). Now we see the real thing, the heavenly Original of the tabernacle. Fittingly, real cherubim, not merely carved imitations, utter the praise. They celebrate the supreme, unimaginable holiness of God at the center. He is the Almighty, the

sovereign ruler. The cherubim creatively build on the seraphic song of Isa. 6:3 by describing God Lordship over past, present, and future, **who was, and is, and is to come**, as in 1:4. The revelation of God now, in this vision, prepares us for that further coming when he will be manifested in consummation (22:1-5).

The living creatures are answered by the 24 elders, as by a kind of antiphonal choir (vv. 10-11). The elders bow down, acknowledging the majesty and authority of God, then pledging their submission, obedience, and reverence. Their crowns, victory wreaths of honor, have meaning only as they are seen as derivative from the One deserving all honor. "Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory" (Ps. 115:1; cf. 1 Cor. 4:7). Would that not only all our theology but all our motives and conduct were thoroughly animated by this impulse of worship!

As evidence of the supreme worthiness of God, the elders single out his action of creation (v. 11). As Creator, God has absolute mastery, ownership, and control over what he has created. In creation, every speck, every atom, every detail of pattern, the very *being* of everything, derived from the hand of God. His triumph was absolute, his power and wisdom unfathomable, his glory superb. Such, then, are so many displays of God's character in creation. They form a wonderful guarantee that he will continue to be Master, up until the full achievement of his purposes in the consummation (21:5-6; see 1:8). God himself is the ultimate guarantee and refuge for saints in distress or discouragement (Heb. 6:13).

The Triumphant Lamb, 5:1-14

Rev. 4 and 5 are two parts of a single magnificent vision of God's glory (see on 4:1-5:14). 5:1 introduces a second act within the vision. From creation in 4:11, the action shifts in 5:1-14 to a focus on redemption and re-creation. God's purposes of redemption and rule can be accomplished only through one uniquely worthy—Jesus Christ. He is simultaneously the fierce Lion of the tribe of Judah, warring against God's enemies (19:11-21; 17:14), and the gentle Lamb that has been slain, who purchased his people with the blood of his atoning sacrifice (5:9-10). Only God in his Trinitarian fullness can accomplish these unbelievable purposes. Note the presence of the Father ("him who sat on the throne," 5:1, 7), the Son ("Lamb," 5:6-7), and the Spirit of God (5:6; see 1:4), who is the horns and eyes of the Lamb.

A key element in this vision is the **scroll**. The scroll might represent a number of things—God's covenant, his law, his promises, his plans, or perhaps a legal will. The close parallel with Daniel 12:4 makes it most likely that the scroll is a heavenly book containing God's plan and the destiny of the world. The unsealing of the book implies the accomplishment of the things God has purposed. John weeps (5:4) because he longs for God's purposes to be accomplished (Matt. 6:10), but such a thing appears to be impossible. However, through Christ's decisive sacrifice a whole host is redeemed (5:9), and the purposes of the exodus and of man's original dominion are finally fulfilled (5:10). All things will be filled with praise for God and for the Lamb (5:11-14).

5:1-14 constitutes the opening scene for the first cycle of judgments that lead up to the Second Coming of Christ (see Introduction: Outline). The Lamb and the sealed scroll are introduced. The opening of the seals in 6:1-8:1 then sets in motion a series of judgments that have their origin in God's throne and his counsel, and that issue in his consummate manifestation (see on 6:12-17 and 8:1).

The scroll in verse 1 contains God's plan for history. It is written on both sides, analogous to the prophetic plans and judgments of Ezekiel 2:9-10. The writing on both sides suggests that the scroll is completely filled, with maximal contents. God's plan contains all the details. But it is inaccessible, as the seven seals indicate. No one is worthy to be the channel through which this plan of God can become known and be executed—no one except the Lamb. John weeps because he senses the importance of this scroll (v. 4). The destiny of John, of the church, of the universe itself hangs in the balance over the question of whether someone can open the scroll.

An elder points to some of the qualifications of Christ (v. 5). He is **the Lion of the tribe of Judah**, alluding to the prophecy of Genesis 49:9-10. Jacob, looking toward the future of his twelve sons, prophesies that the ruler will come from Judah. His lion-like characteristics assure all the people of God that he will be strong and fierce and triumphant in fighting enemies. He is also **the Root of David**, alluding to Isaiah 6:13; 11:1. God indicated to David, who belonged to the tribe of Judah, that the line of rule would come through him and his descendants (2 Sam. 7:12-16). The line of descendants beginning with Solomon looks forward to a single great, everlasting king, as Isaiah makes clear. But Jesus is not merely a descendant of David, which would make him merely a branch out of the root. He is himself the root! If we reckon merely by human physical descent, the descendant would be expected to be subject to the ancestor. But Jesus is Son of God as well as son of David, and has the primacy over David himself in terms of his being, his spiritual qualifications, and his worthiness (cf. Matt. 22:41-46; Ps. 110:1; Isa. 9:6). In fact, in term of ultimate reckoning, the love of God the Father for his Son is the basis on which God set his love on David and raised him to be king. David exists for the sake of Christ rather than the other way around.

After the elder has made his spectacular announcement, the naive reader would expect the appearance of a fierce, mighty warrior. Instead, John sees a **Lamb**, and not only a lamb, but **looking as if it had been slain**. The vision sets forth in dramatic form the central paradox and mystery of the Christian faith. God achieved his triumph and delivered his people, not through the fireworks of military might, but through the weakness of the crucifixion. This way of doing things is an offense to worldly ways of thinking:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor. 1:18-24).

Christ's achievement is unique, but it also sets the pattern for Christians. We are to fight the spiritual battles with the forces of wickedness, not with human military or political strength but with endurance, purity, and faithfulness to Christ, even to the point of death. Martyrdom, which looks like defeat to worldly eyes, seals the saints' victory, because it appropriates the final victory of Christ in his death and resurrection. "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word

of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death" (Rev. 12:11; cf. 11:11-12; 20:4).

The Lamb stands **in the center**, surrounded by the living creatures and the elders, because he is no ordinary angelic servant of God, but the unique mediator of both creation and redemption (Col. 1:13-20), the focal point for all of God's plan (Eph. 1:10). He has **seven horns and seven eyes**, symbolic of his worthiness and ability. Horns frequently represent means of power (Dan. 7:8; 8:3; Ps. 89:17; 92:10), in this case the power of Christ's Spirit-filled eternal life (1 Cor. 15:45; John 3:34; Rom. 8:11). The **seven spirits of God** are the sevenfold fullness of the Holy Spirit, as in 1:4; 4:5 (see also Zech. 3:9; 4:10).

The Lamb **took the scroll**, signifying that he is the only One worthy to mediate God's plan. Accordingly, the living creatures and the elders acknowledge his worthiness and praise him. The golden bowls full of incense link up with the incense in Old Testament worship (Exod. 30:1-10, 34-38). As burning incense rises up to heaven with a sweet smell, so the prayers of God's people ascend to heaven and are a "sweet smell" to him, acceptable because of the intercession of Christ and the Holy Spirit (Heb. 7:23-25; Rom. 8:26-27).

The song of the living creatures and the elders in verses 9-10 recognizes the worthiness of the Lamb in harmony with what we have already observed in verses 1-6. The slaying of the Lamb, in crucifixion, is paradoxically the foundation for his triumph and redemption. This triumph through weakness is foolishness to the world, but it was already anticipated in the exodus from Egypt, where the blood of lambs purchased freedom for the sons of Israel. Now there is a new and final purchase, not through animal blood, but the blood of the Son of God himself:

He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! (Heb. 9:12-14; cf. 10:4-10)

The redemption through the Lamb extends not only to the tribes of Israel, but to **every tribe and language and people and nation** (v. 9). In spiritual battle, both God and Satan claim allegiances on a cosmic, universal scale (7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 12:5; 13:7; 14:6, 8; 15:4; 17:15; 18:3; 19:15; 20:3). But through the merit and power of Christ's sacrifice, God's purposes will be accomplished, fulfilling the Abrahamic promise of blessing to all nations (21:24-27; 7:9-17; Isa. 60:1-5; Gen. 12:3; 22:18). They become **a kingdom and priests**, as in 1:6. Israel was a type, and the fulfillment is an antitype. The unique status that belonged to Israel in Exodus 19:5-6 extends to all the saints in all nations, in antitypical form.

In verses 11-14 praise extends outward. It started with the inner circles represented by the living creatures and the elders. Now the extended hosts of angels take up the praise. And then the earth and its creatures as well (v. 13). The destiny of the entire universe is here adumbrated. All things find their fulfillment and the true meaning of their being in a climax of service to God and revelation of his glory.

1 Beale, Revelation, 298.

Opening the Seven Seals, 6:1-8:1

4:1-5:14 represents the heart of the matter, because it shows us God himself. Now the visions turn to look at the execution of God's plan. History unfolds as a series of judgments leading to the appearing of Christ and the consummation of all things. 6:1-8:1 is the first of seven cycles of judgment, each of which leads us up to the Second Coming (see Introduction: Structure).

The sealed book determines the judgments in 6:1-8:1. This book appeared in 5:1, and the Lamb took it in 5:7. Now judgments from God's throne unfold as the Lamb opens the seven seals one by one. The participation of the Lamb reminds us that such judgments are based on his unique qualifications and accomplishments (5:1-14). In formal structure, 5:1-8:1 runs parallel to 8:2-11:19. Each has an opening scene introducing the origin of the judgments (5:1-14; 8:2-6). Six judgments follow (6:1-17; 8:7-9:21). A dramatic interlude promises care for God's people (7:1-17; 10:1-11:14). The seventh and climactic judgment follows the interlude (8:1; 11:15-19). (See Introduction: Structure.) The seven judgments move forward toward the Second Coming, which occurs in 6:12-17 and 11:15-19. The first four judgments out of the seven have an inner unity. 6:1-8 corresponds to the four living creatures of 4:6 and the four horsemen of Zech. 1:8. 8:7-12 concerns the four major regions of the world, namely dry land, sea, fresh water, and air/sky.

The four horsemen of 6:1-8 represent conquest, war, famine, and death. These calamities characterize an indefinite period before the Second Coming (Mark 13:6-8). Such things occurred in the tumults of the Roman Empire, and may be expected to occur now and just before the Second Coming. The imagery is capable of multiple embodiments (see Introduction: Interpretation). The seven churches were exhorted to put their confidence not in peace and prosperity supposedly achieved by Roman rule, but in God and his promises of a new world (21:4; 2:17; 3:12). When tumults occurred, they were assured that the Lamb was still in control—in fact the tumults issued from his worthiness to break the seals and from the voice of the living creatures. Such judgments represented the chastening hand of God on a rebellious world (cf. 9:20-21). The saints would be cared for in the midst of such trials (7:1-17). They were sealed as a mark of ownership and protection (7:1-10; 9:4), and given perfect rest in the end (7:15-17).

Such promises hold for saints throughout the church age, as well as for the seven churches. We today are to put our hope in the Lamb, and not in earthly promises of prosperity and security. When calamities come, we may remain calm, knowing that the Lamb who was slain for us is still in control (Rom. 8:28-39).

The First Seal: White Horse of Conquest, 6:1-2

The Lamb, the only worthy One, opens the seals one by one. In everyday life, the contents of a sealed scroll would be available only after all the seals were open. However, we have here a vision. For the sake of dramatic efficacy, the plan of God, as contained in the scroll, begins to unfold with the opening of the first seal. The living creatures, as servants of God and the Lamb, participate in the action. Angelic assistants may be involved in many aspects of the history of the world, without our being aware of their role. The perspective from earth is always incomplete, as in Job's case.

A white horse goes forth, representing conquest, the first of four calamities issuing from the four seals. On the basis of similarities with 19:11, some think that Christ appears here, conquering through the gospel. But the white horse is simply parallel to the other three horses. Together they form a foursome analogous to Zechariah 1:8; 6:1-2. In many places in Revelation white symbolizes purity, but in the first century it can also symbolize victory, which is the point here. Conquest can sometimes be bloodless, but can also take the form of bloody war, as in the next calamity (vv. 3-4).

According to our view of the interpretation of Revelation (Introduction: Interpretation), the prophecies here have multiple embodiments. In the first century, the Roman Empire maintained control through conquest, which could include bloodshed and ensuing famine and death. Roman peace promised prosperity, but the reality was different. Conquest, bloodshed, famine, and death also stalk the human race throughout the church age, and may be expected to intensify in the final crisis leading to the Second Coming.

The Second Seal: Red Horse of Slaughter, 6:3-4

From the Lamb and the living creature comes now a second calamity, namely slaughter. War is the most obvious form of slaughter (Mark 13:7), but the picture is broad enough to encompass other forms of slaughter of human life. The fiery red color echoes the fire of God's judgment seen in 4:5 and 1:14, but also anticipates the red blood that will come from the slaughter.

The Third Seal: Black Horse of Famine, 6:5-6

The third horse brings famine. For the average laborer, **a day's wages** (a denarius) buy only enough wheat to eat for the day. In the ancient world barley was cheaper, but also of lower quality. It was poor people's diet. A laborer with a family to support would be forced to a subsistence level. Oil and wine are spared, indicating the partial nature of the famine. But grain foods, wheat and barley rather than oil and wine are, the primary food supplies needed to survive.

The Fourth Seal: Pale Horse of Death, 6:7-8

The four horse is pale, as a symbol of terror. He is named **Death**, and **Hades**, the abode of the dead follows him. The fourth calamity is the most terrible yet, and indeed includes many of the features of the preceding three. The four categories, death, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts, echo Ezekiel 14:21. The calamities grow in intensity, warming up to the final judgment of the Second Coming. But as yet there is still a limit: only **a fourth of the earth**.

The Fifth Seal: The Cry of the Martyrs, 6:9-11

When hearing these frightening descriptions, saints may well wonder what is to become of them in the midst of calamities. God gives a partial answer through the vision of martyrs (see 1:2; 2:10; 2:13). Martyred saints cry out for justice, not because of selfish desires, but in tune with the justice of God's throne (v. 10). They desire to see God's justice fully manifested and evil eliminated. **The inhabitants of the earth** form a group opposing God. Humanity consists of two groups: the people of God, whose citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20), and in opposition to them the rebellious earth-dwellers (6:15; 8:13; 11:10; 13:3, 8, 12, 14; 17:2, 8). Though the picture focuses specifically on martyrs, it applies to all faithful believers. Jesus calls on all his followers to surrender their lifes in order that they may gain eternal life (Matthew 16:24-26; Luke 9:23-26; John 12:25).

Final judgment does not come immediately, but only in God's time (v. 11; 22:7, 10-12, 17; Luke 18:1-8).

The Sixth Seal: The Second Coming, 6:12-17

All dwellers on earth and the cosmos itself experience God's judgment. These verses give the first of seven descriptions in Revelation of events associated with the Second Coming (see Introduction: Structure). In Luke 21:25-27 and Mark 13:24-26 the coming of the Son of Man immediately follows phenomena in sun, moon, and stars. The mention of seven types of people (6:15) suggests complete judgment, as does the characterization of "the great day of their wrath" (6:16-17). Since this world is to be so thoroughly shaken, saints must place their hopes on God (Heb. 12:25-29; Luke 12:32-34; 1 Cor. 7:29-31).

An earthquake indicates that God is coming, and that the very foundations of the creation respond to his presence (compare 8:5; 11:19; 16:18; Mark 13:8; Exod. 19:18; Isa. 29:6; Matt. 27:54). Phenomena in sun, moon, stars, and sky show the shaking of the old order of the first creation, in preparation for the coming of the new creation (Rev. 21:1; 2 Pet. 3:10-14; Matt. 24:29-30; Isa. 13:10; 24:23). People of all types recognize that the judgment of God is coming. They finally come to a point of fearing judgment, but with terror rather than with repentance. As with Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:8), they can only think of fleeing and hiding to avoid exposure and punishment (cf. Luke 23:30; Hos. 10:8; Isa. 2:19).

Saints, on the other hand, may look forward to the Day of Christ with anticipation. It represents their vindication and the suppression of wickedness. It is **the great day of [God's] wrath**, not a mindless, arbitrary human anger, but the just anger of God against the evils and corruptions that have spread on earth (cf. Gen. 6).

Interlude: Protection for the Saints, 7:1-17

The announcement of the seventh seal is dramatically delayed while the saints receive assurance that God knows them and protects them (v. 3) in the midst of the calamities depicted in 6:1-17. They are sealed from harm as in Ezekiel 9:4. The focus is on protection from *spiritual* harm, since it is clear in Revelation that they may suffer persecution and sometimes death for the sake of their faith (Rev. 2:10, 13; 13:15). The interlude contains two complementary pictures: the vision of the 144,000 in 7:1-8 and the vision of the great multitude in 7:9-17. These visions both picture God's protection of his people, but from two different perspectives. The numbering in 7:1-8 links God's people with their Israelite heritage, and emphasizes that God knows and cares for each one, no one being "lost in the shuffle." The same group, though numbered by God, is so vast as to be beyond human numbering (v. 9). They come from every nation, not only through biological descent from Jacob. They appear victorious, secure, and comforted on the other side of **the great tribulation** (v. 14).

The 144,000, 7:1-8

Four angels hold back the four winds, symbolizing that God is holding back calamities until after his people are sealed. The sealing guarantees their protection when the calamities are unleashed (cf. 9:4; Ezek. 9:4). The seal confirms both God's ownership and his protection (cf. 9:4; 14:1; 3:12).

The number of the sealed comes to 12,000 for each tribe. The balanced numbering suggests that 12 is a symbolic number for the fullness of the people of God. Dan is omitted, possibly because Dan was early associated with idolatry (Judges 18; cf. 22:15; 21:8). Instead, we find both the tribe of Joseph and the tribe of Manasseh. Now Manasseh and Ephraim were the two sons of Joseph. Hence, logically we should find either Manasseh and Ephraim as separate heads of two (half) tribes, or Joseph as the head covering both smaller groups. The oddity of this listing again suggests that it is symbolic. Some think that the 144,000 includes only *Jewish* believers. But "servants of our God" in 7:3 must include Gentile saints as well. The equal status of Gentiles and Jews in the seven churches (Eph. 2:11-22), and the promises associated only with the 144,000 (9:4; 14:1-5) confirm it. According to 7:1-8, the saints are known by God one by one, and none slips by his care (cf. Matt. 10:30).

The Great Multitude, 7:9-17

If 7:1-8 emphasizes the Israelite heritage of the New Testament people of God, 7:9-17 emphasizes their international character. They are **a great multitude ... from every nation, tribe, people, and language**, fulfilling the promise to Abraham that all the peoples on earth would be blessed through him (Gen. 12:3; 17:5).

Holding palm branches as a sign of joyous celebration (John 12:13), they praise God whose salvation they have received. As in the scene in 4:1-5:14, many beings join in the praise.

The victors, the whole people of God, **have come out of the great tribulation** (v. 14). Many identify the great tribulation with a final period of persecution shortly before the Second Coming. But tribulations for Christians occur throughout the church age, so that the whole age can be characterized as tribulation (2 Thess. 1:5-6; 2 Tim. 3:1, 12). The passage is a relevant comfort to first century Christians as well as those in the final crisis. (See 11:2.)

The white robes of purity and honor belong to the multitude not because of achievements through their own power, but through the power of Christ's redemption. In a startling juxtaposition, his blood washes them white (cf. Zech. 13:1; Isa. 4:4; Heb. 9:14; 1 John 1:7).

The victorious saints appear before God to enjoy his presence in a situation of paradisiacal peace and comfort (vv. 15-17). At the heart of blessing is the presence of God and the Lamb, and their care for the saints. The picture here anticipates the final peace of 21:1-4; 22:1-5. Since 6:12-17 has already taken us up to the Second Coming, the next event would be the appearing of the new Jerusalem and its blessings. But Revelation is not ready at this early point in its dramatic development to expose fully God's plans for the new world. It suffices that the saints receive his promise in general terms at this point.

The Seventh Seal: Silence in Heaven, 8:1

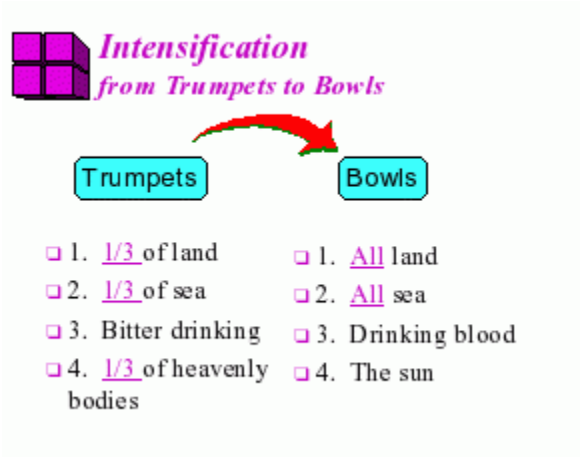
What happens with the opening of the seventh seal? We expect the seventh in this series to be climactic. Seven symbolizes completeness; so with the seventh seal we should complete our travel through history. The phenomena accompanying the Second Coming occur with the sixth seal, 6:12-17. So now we wait for a description of the actual appearing of Christ (cf. Mark 13:24-26), final judgment and the new heavens and the new earth. What actually takes place seems to be an anticlimax: simply silence. Some interpreters have seen this silence as a blank, that is then filled

with the contents of the trumpets (8:2-11:19). But it is difficult to find such a use of silence in ancient literature, nor does it fit the tempo of Revelation, in which 6:12-17 already brings the Second Coming. The trumpets begin another cycle looking back over times earlier than 6:12-17. Within a framework of biblical symbolism, the silence most naturally indicates that heaven stands in awe at the presence of God (cf. Hab. 2:20; Zeph. 1:7). God appears. His awesome appearance is the central reality. At this early point, the seer is not given a fuller picture either describing God or the accompanying events of final judgment and re-creation. This reserve maintains the reader's interest for later cycles of judgment.

The Seven Trumpets, 8:2-11:19

Seven angels blow seven trumpets. The trumpets set in motion seven judgments leading up to the Second Coming (see Introduction: Structure). The trumpets form the second cycle out of several that depict God's rule over history from various angles. Like the trumpets used in the battle of Jericho (Josh. 6), these trumpets lead up to the fall of the worldly city (11:13), and in the seventh trumpet the complete victory of God arrives. The trumpet plagues are reminiscent of the plagues on Egypt, signifying God's judgments on idolatrous power.

The seven seals began with announcements of riders commissioned to bring calamities (6:1-8). The seven trumpets, by contrast, contain vivid descriptions of the calamities themselves. The intensity of judgment has moved up. Yet still some things are spared: most of the trumpet plagues fall on a third and not on all; the locust plague of 9:1-12 is over after five months; some people survive the collapse of the city in 11:13. By contrast, the later judgments with the bowls (15:1-16:21) are thoroughly devastating.



The first four trumpet plagues (8:7-12) strike the four major regions of creation: dry land, sea, fresh water, and sky. The first four bowls affect the same four regions (16:1-9). The trumpet plagues strike 1/3 of the region, indicating a less intense judgment than the corresponding bowl judgment. In this way the judgments in Revelation build up in intensity and in focus on the Second Coming, until 19:11-20:15.

Within the period of the early church, these visions were fulfilled both through natural calamities and through analogous spiritual calamities afflicting the souls of the wicked. Within apocalyptic imagery the one type of calamity can represent the other. The general principles can be applied more broadly (see Introduction: Interpretation). Both human beings and the natural world undergo stress until the time of final renewal (Rom. 8:18-25). Final effects touching the natural world as well as human beings accompany the Second Coming (2 Pet. 3:10, 12).

Angels with the Seven Trumpets, 8:2-6

The trumpet judgments issue from God's angels, who stand before his throne (v. 2). The vision of 4:1-5:14 remains an anchor point for this new cycle of visions. Like the seal judgments of 6:1-8:1, these judgments are executed according to God's plan and in accord with his orders. The prayers of the saints play a notable part in originating the judgments (vv. 3-4; cf. 5:8). For noises, lightning, and earthquake, see 4:5; 6:12.

Blowing the First Four Trumpets, 8:7-13

Trumpet	Plague	Parallel in Exodus
1, in 8:7	hail and fire	7: hail and fire
2, in 8:8-9	blood	1: blood
3, in 8:10-11	bitter water	
4, in 8:12	darkness	9: darkness
5, in 9:1-11	locusts	8: locusts
6. in 9:13-21	army	
7, in 11:15-19	storm	Exod. 19:16-19

Hail and fire (v. 7) are reminiscent of the seventh Egyptian plague in Exodus 9:23-24. As in the case of the Egyptian plagues, these judgments come from God against evildoers. They show that God is the true God, and call people to repentance. Yet, like the Egyptians, people may harden themselves and not repent (cf. 9:20-21). Some other trumpet plagues parallel other Egyptian plagues.

After the fourth trumpet an eagle appears, indicating that even more terrible judgments follow in the last three trumpet plagues (v. 13). He announces **woe**, a typical beginning to a prophetic oracle (for example, Amos 5:18; 6:1). The three last trumpets are grouped together as three woes (9:12; 11:14). These plagues explicitly discriminate between the righteous and the wicked, as did the later Egyptian plagues.

The Fifth Trumpet: Locusts, 9:1-12

The fifth trumpet blast sets in motion a horrific army of locusts, energized by demonic sources (9:1-2). The imagery derives from Exodus 10:13-15 and from Joel 2:1-11, where a literal locust plague foreshadows even more devastating judgment coming from a divinely commissioned army (Joel 2:11). Their terrorizing powers compare only to those of the Beast (13:1-10). These infernal monsters attack only the wicked, not the saints (9:4).

The wicked sometimes suffer even in this life in a way that presages their final punishment (20:11-15). The vision depicts the self-defeating and tormenting nature of wickedness in the human soul. This general principle has multiple fulfillments (Introduction: Interpretation). Within the Roman Empire, it represents how people giving themselves to the worship of idols and the worship of the Emperor suffer torments of soul. In addition, as God brings the structures of the Empire under judgment, people may experience suffering through social, political, and military failures as well. In the future, just before the Second Coming, judgments of God against the wicked will intensify. The general principle applies to the entire period of the church age. Wickedness brings suffering rather than the hoped-for success (cf. Prov. 10:6, 7, 9, 11, etc.). Like Proverbs, Revelation delineates a general pattern. But it is also honest about the fact that the saints may for a time suffer grievously (6:9-10). Within this world order, justice does not always triumph quickly.

The locusts operate for **five months** (v. 5). A normal locust swarm would move on after a few days. This demonic swarm stays for the whole period during which locusts might be seen, emphasizing the severity of this judgment. The leader is **Apollyon**. Both **Apollyon** and **Abaddon** mean destroyer. There may be an ironic allusion to Nero or Domitian, both of whom saw themselves as imitators of the Greek god Apollo.

The Sixth Trumpet: The Conquering Army, 9:13-21

The Roman Empire feared an attack of the Parthians from beyond the Euphrates (9:14), the eastern border of the Empire. But all such fears are dwarfed by what Revelation pictures. Outside threats experienced by the Roman Empire presage the final day of battle of cosmic proportions (16:14). 9:13-21 is similar to 16:14, but the consequences are less severe, still leaving time for repentance

(9:18-21). Nations as well as individuals who give themselves to idols or to the worship of power and militancy may find themselves overwhelmed in a military judgment brought against them. It happened to ancient Babylon, to Greece, to Rome, to Hitler's Third Reich, and to the Soviet Union.

Interlude: The Witness of the Saints, 10:1-11:14

Between the sixth and seventh trumpet stands an interlude (10:1-11:14) with two scenes (10:1-11 and 11:1-14). Both scenes concern the role of God's people and their prophetic witness during the time of trial. In the first scene (10:1-11) John receives prophetic messages and is commissioned to proclaim them. The second (11:1-14) depicts the history of the two witnesses and their larger environment.

The Little Scroll Given to John, 10:1-11

10:1-11 has parallels to Daniel 10:5-6 and to the call of Ezekiel in Ezekiel 2:1-3:11. John receives the prophetic messages of a "little scroll." Some have thought that the scroll contains the contents of 12:1-22:5, and that 12:1 begins a new major division in the structure of Revelation More likely, the vision of 10:1-11 speaks in a general fashion of John's being empowered to continue to prophesy. Though John's role is unique, he is still in many ways an example and pattern for the church's witness (see 1:2). We must take to heart the message of John (1:3), live by it, and be ready to communicate its implications to "peoples, nations, languages and kings" (10:11).

A mighty angel appears reflecting the very glory of God and his throne room (vv. 1-2; cf. 1:14-16; Dan. 10:5-6; Ezek. 1:27-28). His majesty underlines the authority and divine source of the message.

Seven thunders speak, but John cannot tell us what is their content (vv. 3-4). In Revelation God reveals the substance of his plan, but reserves many aspects and details in his secret counsel (Deut. 29:29). We must be content to trust God in the midst of our own partial knowledge, confident that he knows all and governs all for our benefit (Rom. 8:28-39).

The announcement of **no more delay** (v. 6) indicates that the consummation of all God's prophetic plans comes with the seventh trumpet. Like the cycle of seven seals, the cycle of trumpets leads up to the Second Coming. Here, the angel underlines explicitly the significance of the Second Coming as the wrapping up of God's plan for history (Eph. 1:10).

John takes and eats the little scroll, in a manner parallel to Ezekiel 2:3-3:9, indicating that God commissions him with an Ezekiel-like task of prophesying woe in the face of an unrepentant world. The scroll will **turn your stomach sour**. The contents of the scroll contain much news of suffering. At the same time, it is **sweet as honey** in the mouth (cf. Ezek. 2:3; Ps. 119:103; 19:10). The word of God provides communion with God and his goodness; hence sweetness accompanies even a message of woe.

The Two Witnesses, 11:1-14

This second part of the interlude concentrates on the story of the two witnesses. Like Moses and Elijah, these witnesses perform striking miracles (vv. 5-6). Other Old Testament backgrounds are woven into the vision. The mention of two olive trees and lampstands (v. 4) likens the witnesses to the vision of Zechariah 4:1-14, in which the trees probably symbolize the ruling and priestly offices

of Zerubbabel and Joshua. Thus the witnesses are prominent representatives of God. The witnesses' stand against the Beast reminds us of the conflicts against bestial kingdoms in Daniel (vv. 7-10). Verse 8 reminds us of wicked, oppressive cities and powers: Sodom, Egypt, and Jerusalem that crucified Jesus. The resurrection in verses 11-12 reminds us of the resurrection of Christ, but also of the language of Ezekiel 37 and the rapture of Elijah.

Like John in 10:1-11, the two witnesses are models for all the saints to imitate. All of us are to be faithful to the testimony of Jesus, even in the face of violent persecution from the Beast. We must be willing to face martyrdom, and God guarantees our vindication (vv. 11-12).

Some aspects of this vision remain difficult and controversial. Some interpreters think that two literal individual human beings are in view: either two Christian prophets who were martyred shortly before the fall of Jerusalem, or two prophets who will appear shortly before the Second Coming. But in agreement with Revelation as a whole we find here a symbolic vision of Christian witness. The two witnesses are two lampstands (v. 4), indicating that they are symbolic figures standing for the witness of the lampstand-churches of 1:20. Thus they symbolize churches rather than specific human individuals. Two rather than seven lampstands are mentioned to imitate the pattern of Zechariah 4 and of Moses and Elijah (Matt. 17:3-4; cf. Deut. 17:6; Luke 10:1).

The trampling of the city for 42 months has sometimes been correlated with the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. But a closer look shows that the events do not correspond in detail. Verse 1 indicates that the inner part, the temple and the altar, are preserved. And nothing that we know concerning the fall of Jerusalem corresponds exactly to the two witnesses. Instead, 11:1-14 gives a general visionary representation of the witness of the church and God's preservation and vindication of the witness. The two witnesses are two lampstands (v. 4), that is, two churches (1:20).

The temple represents the presence of God on earth, especially through his people (see note on 4:1-5:14). Measurement signifies God's knowledge and care (cf. Ezek. 40-41). The altar and those who worship there represent the true worshipers of God, who are sealed and protected (cf. 7:1-17). The destruction of the outer court represents the attack of outsiders on God's people.

What about the **42 months**? It is a limited time of distress and intense conflict between God's people and their opponents (13:5). It is also described as 1260 days (11:3; 12:6) or a time, times, and half a time (three and a half years; 12:14). (In a symbolic context like this one, months are reckoned as consisting of 30 days each.) It is half of seven years, which from a symbolic point of view suggests a complete period of suffering, cut short by half. The main background is found in Daniel 7:25, which in turn is related to other passages in Daniel (9:27; 12:7, 11-12). Some futurist interpreters look for a period of time of this length shortly before the Second Coming. But like other numbers in Revelation, this one is symbolic in character, and related to the three and a half days in 11:9, 11. It then designates a period of persecution of limited length.

The most significant clue comes from Daniel 9:27. In Daniel 9 God sets out a period of 70 weeks or 490 years or 10 jubilee cycles during which he will accomplish his purposes for worldwide redemption (Dan. 9:24). This period of 70 weeks builds on the earlier period of 70 years of exile prophesied by Jeremiah (Dan. 9:2; Jer. 25:12; 29:10). Each of Jeremiah's 70 years is a sabbatical year in which the land rests (2 Chron. 36:21; Lev. 26:43; 25:1-7). Hence, symbolically speaking, it represents a total of 490 years. At the end of this period God favors Israel again and restores them

to the land and to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-4; 2 Chron. 36:22-23). But this restoration is only preliminary. The final restoration takes place at the conclusion of a second cycle of 490 years. And since the whole sabbath pattern symbolizes final rest, it is fitting that this second cycle consists of symbolical years, symbolizing the way to the consummation. The consummation occurs at the end of 490 symbolical years. The last week of years, 7 symbolical years, stands for the time of inaugurated eschatology, after the Messiah has come and accomplished redemption (Dan. 9:26a). In the middle of the last week the sanctuary is destroyed (Dan. 9:27), which took place in 70 A.D. The period from 70 A.D. to the Second Coming is the last half week of Daniel's prophecy, a period of trouble and persecution as in Daniel 7:25. The 1260 days is thus the entire interadvent period, viewed as a time of persecution and distress (cf. 2 Tim. 3:1-13; 2 Thess. 1:4-8).1

Like other visions, this vision has multiple applications throughout the church age. For the seven churches in their first century context it indicates that persecution will come, but it will be limited in length and end in vindication (vv. 11-12). It likewise holds out the same promise for Christians throughout the ages. Just before the Second Coming we are to expect a violent crisis that will bring intense conflict and persecution (2 Thess. 2:1-12).

The witnesses work miraculous signs of judgment, in a manner reminiscent of Moses and Elijah, two great miracle-working prophets from the Old Testament (vv. 5-6). Like Moses and Elijah, the church bears prophetic witness. We call people to repentance and warn of coming judgment. Our total message includes not only good news concerning salvation in Christ, but also the revelation of God's character, which implies that judgment against evil doers is inevitable. Our message is one of power—power to save, or power to punish as well (2 Cor. 2:15-17; Rom. 1:16). It is not an arbitrary power, to do with as we see fit, but a power that comes from God and that we exercise only as servants who ourselves proclaim a message that we cannot alter (Eph. 2:6; 2 Cor. 3:5-6; 6:6-7; 10:4-6).

The Beast in verse 7 represents demonized state power turned to persecute the church (see 13:1-10 and Introduction: Counterfeiting). Satan energizes false worship and stirs up opposition to the true message, trying to snuff out Christians and their witness (12:13-13:10). Persecution and martyrdom throughout history are all of a piece, as verse 8 reminds us. Whether in Sodom (Gen. 19), in Egypt (Exod. 1-15), or in Jerusalem (Christ's death), the enemies of God oppose God and his people. The witness of God's people is odious to them, because they prefer the darkness (John 3:17-21). Instead of receiving the witness gratefully, they experience it as a torment (v. 10).

The picture given here is extreme, and for good reason. In most of life, when people inspect their conscious motives, they find confusing mixtures. The saints are followers of Christ, but their obedience is flawed and inconsistent. Non-Christians are in rebellion against God, but their rebellion is likewise inconsistent. They are not as bad as they could be, but are restrained in mysterious ways. They find themselves, albeit from wrong motives, admiring and imitating some of the good that they see around them. But this mixture of motives can easily obscure the seriousness of the most fundamental conflict in history, between God and his enemies. Revelation puts the spotlight on this fundamental conflict, and therefore depicts good and evil in black-and-white fashion. The two witnesses are supremely powerful witnesses. Conversely, their opponents are supremely hostile opponents. The dwellers on earth not only want to see the witnesses dead, but unashamedly rejoice and celebrate death, indicating the full hardness of their position (vv. 9-10).

Such polarization of allegiance is the reality at a fundamental level. Revelation gives us a look behind the obscuring curtain of civilizing and moderating ploys that conceal our deepest allegiances.

The lesson is a most important one. In your own life, see the deadly conflict and persevere unflinchingly in witness and loyalty to Christ. In the lives of earthlings, see beneath the veneer of pleasantries the deadly opposition that only divine saving power can cure. Witness is a weighty factor in spiritual war. But it fails to convert unless God renews people's hearts.

The scene is **the great city**, the worldly city, including not only Sodom and Egypt of old, not only Jerusalem, but Rome, each of the seven cities in Asia Minor, and our modern cities as well. It is the city bent on independence from God's way, as was Babel of old (Gen. 11:1-9). The war between the two cities, the city of God (Heb. 12:22-29; 11:16) and the city of man, continues throughout history until Babel/Babylon is finally destroyed (Rev. 17-18) and the new Jerusalem comes to consummation (21:1-22:5).

The bodies of the witnesses lie unburied for **three and a half days** (vv. 9, 11). This three and a half days repeats on a smaller scale the period of three and a half years (12:14; see on 11:2) or 42 months in which the saints experience persecution. The three and a half years is a period of intense persecution. By analogy, the three and a half days are a period so intense that it looks as if the witness of the church is completely snuffed out. They are **dead**. Not only in the Roman Empire, but nowadays, and in the final crisis, it comes sometimes to a point when faithful witnesses seem to go down in defeat. The Christians are all in prison or dead, and apparently the idol state has triumphed. The antichrist tyrant is in control, whether Domitian or Diocletian or the Spanish Inquisition or North Korean communism or Saudi Arabia's Islamic state power. But note: **three and a half days** are seven days cut in half, signifying a domination that aspired to completeness (7), but is cut off half way (1/2 of 7). Moreover, three and a half clearly resonates with the three days of Christ's resurrection (Matt. 12:40; Mark 8:31; etc.). Christ's martyrdom and resurrection is the pattern, the firstfruits (1 Cor. 15:23, 49). We who belong to Christ cannot but share in his victory. So the martyr's death is not defeat, but victory in union with Christ.

The Seventh Trumpet: God's Temple Opened, 11:15-19

The second cycle of judgments (8:2-11:19) closes with a second description of the Second Coming. It zeroes in on the last judgment (v. 18) and the triumph of God's kingly rule (vv. 15, 17). The opening of God's temple in heaven is the opening of the original of which the earthly temple was a copy. The **ark** is seen (v. 19). The ark was the most holy object in the tabernacle (Exod. 25:10-22). It was normally concealed from sight behind the tabernacle curtains. The revealing of this innermost object signifies that God has fully revealed his glory, both the glory of his law (the covenant words) and of his mercy (as signified by the atonement cover).

All in all, this opening implies the revealing of God himself. Lightning, thunder, and storm phenomena accompany his appearing, as at Mount Sinai, showing the majesty of his power. With God's presence comes also the renewal of all things (21:1-22:5). But the further explanation of this renewal must wait for a later point in the dramatic development in Revelation (Introduction: Structure).

1 Much of this interpretation of Daniel 9 I owe to Meredith G. Kline, "The Covenant of the Seventieth Week," The Law and the Prophets, ed. John H. Skilton (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974) 452-69.

Seven Symbolic Histories, 12:1-14:20

We have seen the first two cycles of judgments, the seven seals (6:1-8:1) and the seven trumpets (8:2-11:19). Now we begin the third cycle. This third cycle of visions consists primarily of histories of key symbolic characters: the Dragon, the Woman, the Beast, the False Prophet, the 144,000, angelic announcers, and the Son of Man (see Introduction: Structure). Unlike the seven seals and seven trumpets, these visions have no explicit numbering. But like the preceding cycles, these lead up to a vision of the Second Coming (14:14-20). The two preceding cycles have focused on the judgments issuing from God's throne. This cycle depicts in depth the nature of the spiritual conflict. Characters appear in symbolic form to represent the forces on the two sides of a cosmic spiritual war.

God himself has already been revealed in 4:1-5:14. Opposing God are Satan (the Dragon) and his agents, the Beast (13:1-10) and the False Prophet (13:11-18; see 16:13). On God's side are his people, portrayed as a light-bearing woman (12:1-6, 13-17), and as a chaste, numbered, and protected multitude (14:1-5). These two complementary pictures show the saints in their capacity as witnesses of God's light and as separated from the corruptions of the world. Thus the saints are exhorted to remain faithful to Christ in opposition to the persecution of the Beast; and to remain pure in opposition to the seduction of the Prostitute (see Introduction: Counterfeiting). The symbolic pictures show the two sides stripped of all inconsistency and confusion, so that we may better understand the nature of our warfare (cf. Eph. 6:10-20). The present conflicts will be superseded by the peace of 21:1-22:5 when the consummation of God's plans takes effect.

Like the first two cycles, this one consists of four parts (Introduction: Structure). An opening scene introduces the characters (12:1-6). Then follow 6 symbolic histories (12:7-14:11). After an interlude reassuring the saints (14:12-13) comes the seventh, climactic history (14:14-20). There are thus seven symbolic histories in all: the history of the Dragon (12:7-12), the history of the woman (12:13-17), the history of the Beast (13:1-10), the history of the False Prophet (13:11-18), the history of the 144,000 (14:1-5), the history of the angelic proclaimers (14:6-11), and the history of the coming of the Son of Man (14:14-20).

The Woman and the Dragon, 12:1-6

A woman appears arrayed in cosmic light. The imagery calls to mind Joseph's dream (Gen. 37:9-10) and the picture of Jerusalem bringing forth the Messiah and his remnant (Mic. 5:3; Isa. 54:1-4; 66:7-

13). The Old Testament saints collectively are in view. Mary the mother of Jesus is included in this group, but only as an outstanding member of the whole. The later history shows that the New Testament saints also are included (12:13-17). The light-bearing character of the woman foreshadows the glory of the new Jerusalem (21:11, 22-27). She has her citizenship in heaven (Phil. 3:20), and receives the splendor and importance of heaven. In her privileges the church now already partakes in the blessings of what is to come. But she is still buffeted by Satan.

Opposing the woman is **an enormous red dragon**. Our chief opponent is not any earthly power. We struggle "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12), at the head of which is Satan (Eph. 2:2; 2 Cor. 4:4). The Dragon is identified as Satan, the Devil, in 12:9. The image of a dragon shows that Satan has enormous power and hideous enmity to God. Satan has constantly opposed the plans of God, and has been repeatedly defeated in the great acts of God's saving power (Gen. 3:1, 15; Ps. 74:13-14; Isa. 27:1; 51:9-10; Ezek. 29:3; Luke 10:18; 11:14-23; John 12:31; Col. 2:15). Now he rises against the Messiah (12:4-5) and his servants (12:17), but will suffer final destruction (20:10). The Ancient Near East has certain myths about a sea monster or water god producing chaos. Polytheistic myths dimly sensed the threat of Satanic chaos, but in their confused groping they never penetrated to the reality.

The Dragon has seven heads, increasing his hideousness. In the symbolism of Daniel and Revelation, multiple heads often symbolize multiple manifestations of a single kingdom. In the same way, Satan manifests his power through multiple channels and in multiple institutions and events. Seven, the number of completeness, suggests that the Dragon has extensive power and many manifestations. He aspires blasphemously to imitate the completeness of God.

The Dragon's tail **swept a third of the stars out of the sky**. The Dragon attacks God's order and rule, symbolized by the order of the stars. He assaults heaven itself, symbolized by the effect on heavenly bodies. This verse has given rise to speculation that a third of the angels fell and became demons at the time that Satan rebelled against God. But the Bible gives few details about the fall of Satan and his angels. The immediate focus of verse 4 is not on Satan's original act of rebellion but on his attack on the **male child**. In the background lies Daniel 8:10, which predicts the attack of Antiochus Epiphanes on the Jewish people and their temple. Against this background, the stars may symbolize the angelic representatives of the church in its heavenly character (note the stars in Rev. 12:1; Michael and his angels in 12:7).1

The woman **gave birth to a son**, in fulfillment of Micah 5:3. Christ is born, and his triumphant rule over the nations is certain to be established.

Satan attempts to destroy the child as soon as it is born, as Herod did in Matthew 2:1-18. Herod's action is the beginning of a series of satanically engineered attempts to deflect the accomplishment of God's salvation. Satan tempts Christ in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13) and is active in the background when Christ casts out demons and when he confronts opposition from Jewish leaders. Revelation encapsulates all this opposition in the single picture of Satan seeking to devour the child. Passing over Jesus' earthly life, it arrives immediately at the ascension and enthronement of the Messiah: **her child was snatched up to God and to his throne**. The Messiah himself is beyond the reach of Satanic attack. So, subsequent to the ascension, Satan turns his attention to the **woman**, the followers of the Messiah.

God looks after the woman for 1260 days, the same period of 42 months or three and a half years mentioned in 11:2-3; 12:14; 13:5. (For a full discussion, see under 11:2-3.) The 1260 days is the entire interadvent period. It begins immediately after Christ's ascension. It continues throughout the period of Satanic assaults on the church, that is, the whole period until the Second Coming. During the entire period, God protects the church from satanic attacks. But the vision also applies with particular force to times of intense distress that may come when the church suffers violent attack. The protection comes in **the desert**. Israel after the exodus from Egypt wandered in the desert. This desert gave them relief from the idolatry and oppression of Egypt. But it was also a time of testing, a time tempting them to lose faith and rebel. They were to look forward to rest and satisfaction in the promised land. Similarly, the church looks forward to final rest in the new heavens and the new earth. But for now she is subject to testing on earth.

The Dragon's Defeat, 12:7-12

The victory of Christ (12:5) results in sweeping consequences, beginning with the expulsion of Satan by Michael, who is functioning as an agent of Christ (see Dan. 10:21). We are not to think here of the fall of Satan at the time of creation, but of the defeat of Satan in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ (12:12; Col. 2:15; John 12:31).

The war was fought **in heaven**. The Bible indicates that until the time of Christ's triumph, Satan was permitted to appear in the heavenly places (Job 1:6; 2:1; Zech. 3:1-2; Luke 10:18). His abilities are curtailed through Christ's earthly ministry and above all through Christ's resurrection and ascension (cf. Rev. 12:11).

As with the serpent in Genesis 3, Satan's chief weapon is his deceit. He **leads the whole world astray** (v. 9). He tries to confuse the church with heresies (v. 15) as well as accusing people before God for their sins (v. 10; Zech. 3:1-2).

In verses 10-12 **a loud voice from heaven**, the voice of heavenly worshipers, celebrates the fact that Christ has already achieved the decisive victory. Satan has been defeated (vv. 7-9). His ability to accuse is curtailed (v. 10). The salvation and kingdom of God have already come (v. 10). However, strife still continues for a short time on earth (v. 12). As usual, the "shortness" is measured by prophetic standards, as in 1:3. The time of fulfillment of God's purposes has arrived, and this fulfillment unfolds in a way that stretches out toward the consummation. Revelation reminds saints in distress that martyrdom may come, but that because of Christ's victory over death the martyr is victorious rather than defeated by death (v. 11). Victory has both a present and a future manifestation.

Protection for the Woman, 12:13-17

Having failed to destroy Christ (12:4-5), the Dragon tries to destroy the people of Christ. He uses his mouth, representing his deceit (12:15, 9; 2 Thess. 2:9-10). When deceit fails, he tries persecuting power (12:17-13:10). The woman flies to the desert, an image that speaks of the powerful and supernatural care of God active on behalf of his people. His people experience powerful protection even in circumstances where it may seem impossible that they would be delivered. "For nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). By speaking of the desert and the period of three and a half years,

Revelation here expands on the earlier summary in verse 6. The protection applies to the entire interadvent period (see the discussion under 12:6 and 11:2-3).

The earth comes to the help of the woman. The very structure of God's created world restricts and frustrates Satan's plans. Since Satan cannot wipe out the church as a whole through his deceit, he tries another plan: to **war against the rest of her offspring**. 13:1-18 exposes the character of this war, indicating that it involves raising up earthly instruments of persecution.

The Beast, 13:1-10

A beast rising out of the sea represents persecuting power, especially the power of a demonized state. The monstrous mixture of features shows the fierceness and the repulsiveness of the Beast. He is hideous. One might be terrorized into submission, but who would genuinely want to worship this mass of ugliness? The rebellious world is fascinated with his power (13:4), but Christians have their eyes opened through this and other biblical revelations.

The Beast combines features from the four beasts of Daniel 7:1-8, 17-27. The beasts of Daniel represent idolatrous kingdoms. This Beast in Revelation must be a worldly kingdom summing all of them up. The state-controlled persecutions against Daniel and his friends thus suggest the nature of the persecution that the seven churches must face from the Roman state—and persecutions of later ages. Interpreters disagree about which particular persecution the Beast most directly represents (see Introduction: Interpretation). Because it expresses a general principle of Satanic opposition, we may expect multiple manifestations. As indicated in the Introduction, these manifestations include the first century, the final crisis, and all times in between.

In Asia Minor local officials threatened to kill Christians if they refused to worship the Roman Emperor. A similar opposition to godly worship will crop up just before the Second Coming (2 Thess. 2:4). Persecutions come sporadically in between these two times (2 Tim. 3:12-13; 1 Pet. 4:12-19; Matt. 24:9). 2 Thessalonians 2:7-8 indicates that we are dealing with a repeated pattern of Satanic opposition ("the secret power of lawlessness"). This lawlessness is currently restrained, but will have a final, climactic outbreak ("and then the lawless one will be revealed"). Christians must not be surprised by these pressures. They must face martyrdom, if necessary, knowing that God is in control and that his triumph is certain.

The Beast represents in the first place demonized state power that demands worship. As with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Dan. 3), the demonized state threatens to kill Christians unless they bow down. But the symbolism of the Beast applies to more subtle temptations to idolatry. In democratic countries, the state does not insist on literal worship. But citizens are tempted to look to the state as if it were a messiah. It is the greatest concentration of earthly power, and so it must be the remedy for all ills, economic, social, medical, moral, and even spiritual. Moreover, state persecution in its blatant form threatens to overwhelm us through fear. But in subtle ways in our hearts we are tempted to give ultimate commitments to anything that we fear: fear of man (human opinion), fear of death, fear of pain, fear of poverty. So this picture of idolatry has universal application (see discussion in the Introduction: Counterfeiting).

The Beast is a counterfeit of Christ. Note the following parallels:

- The Beast is an image of Satan, whom Satan brought forth (13:1), just as Christ is the exact image of God, begotten by the Father (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3; Ps. 2:7).
- The Beast has ten crowns, while Christ has many crowns (19:12).
- The Beast has blasphemous names written on him, while Christ has worthy names (19:12).
- The Dragon gave the Beast his power and his throne and great authority (13:2), just as Christ has power (5:12-13) and throne (3:21) and authority (12:10) from the Father (John 5:21-23).
- The Beast has a fatal wound, counterfeiting Christ's resurrection (13:3). The Beast's healing is one of the principal features that attracts followers, just as the resurrection of Christ is one of the principal points of evangelistic proclamation.
- Worship is directed both to the Dragon and the Beast, just as Christians worship both the Father and the Son (John 5:23).
- The Beast attracts the worship of the whole world (13:3), just as Christ is to be worshipped universally.
- The Beast utters blasphemies, while Christ utters the praises of God (Heb. 2:12).
- The Beast makes war against the saints, while Christ makes war against the Beast (19:11-21). The song of praise to the Beast in 13:4 counterfeits the song to God the warrior in Exod. 15:11. The striking juxtaposition of Christ and the Beast in 19:11-21 shows that these two are the two main warriors in the battle. Christ is the divine warrior, fulfilling the imagery of Exod. 15:3; Isa. 59:16-18; 63:1-6; Hab. 3:3-15; Zech. 9:13-15; 14:1-5. The Beast is the unholy, counterfeit warrior, fulfilling the imagery of Dan. 7:1-8.

Satan himself attempts to counterfeit God the Father. He engages in a mock creation, in which he brings forth his image out of chaotic waters (13:1; parallel to Gen. 1:2). Similarly, the False Prophet, or beast from the earth (13:11-18), counterfeits the work of the Holy Spirit. He desires that people worship not himself, but the Beast, just as the Holy Spirit glorifies Christ (John 16:14). He works miraculous signs, counterfeiting the miracles of the Holy Spirit (13:13-14). He forces a mark on his subjects (13:16), just as Christians are sealed with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13).

Together, Satan, the Beast, and the False Prophet form an unholy trio (16:13). They counterfeit the Holy Trinity (see Introduction: Counterfeiting). Satan as a deceiver is always trying to make his ways look attractive (2 Cor. 11:14-15). Our danger lies in the fact that his counterfeits are always close to the real thing, and we may mistake the one for the other. But when Revelation opens our eyes, there is a world of difference between his horrors and God's beauties. We can be confident because he is only a counterfeiter, an imitator, not a creator. And his productions are always bestial and degenerate like himself. Beasts must give way before Christ the king (19:11-21).

One final counterfeit figure exists, namely Babylon the prostitute, the counterfeit of the bride of Christ. See 17:1-19:10.

The Beast's **ten horns** imitate the ten horns of the Dragon (12:3). They represent his power. 17:12 indicates that they take particular form in "ten kings" who help execute his purpose. The horns correspond to the ten horns of the fourth beast in Daniel 7:7, 20. The **seven heads** represent

multiple manifestations, as in 17:10, again imitating the Dragon (12:3). The Beast combines features of leopard, bear, and lion (v. 2). He sums up the beasts in Daniel 7:2-7, and is more fierce and hideous than any of them.

Behind the Beast, as an earthly institution, a perversion of state power, stands the Dragon who energies and endorses him (v. 2). Christians are to be alert to Satanic influence not only with individuals but with institutions and whole societies. The mass of people in the Roman Empire were attracted to emperor worship, but the number of people seduced did not lessen the seriousness of their error. Likewise communism and fascism and Hinduism and materialism and New Age spirituality may be mass movements today, but Christians must resist these mass seductions.

The Beast's **mortal wound** and recovery counterfeit Christ's resurrection. Revelation may be alluding to a myth that grew up after Nero's death (68 A.D.). A rumor spread that he had not really died, and that he would soon return at the head of the Parthians to wreak vengeance. But the symbolism has broader application. The revival of a powerful movement or an institution after serious trouble seems to indicate to the followers that it is invincible. The Empire seemed to survive all threats, thereby showing that it was eternal and attracting more worship than ever. But all such hopes are mistaken. Only Christ brings eternal life, and only his kingdom will last forever.

The Beast's counterfeit character comes out clearly in his blasphemies (v. 5). Even these are ultimately under God's control, as is hinted by the phrase **was given**. God gives people even the strength and breath through which they blaspheme him. The continued dependence on God underlines the security of the saints and the ultimate futility of all opposition to God.

In addition, we find that the Beast's power has a definite limit. He exercises **his authority for forty-two months**. This period is the same period of distress and persecution mentioned in 11:2-3; 12:6, 14. (See discussion under 11:2.)

The Beast compels worship (13:8), and when the saints refuse to submit, they are martyred. But despite their apparent defeat, martyrs enjoy victory with Christ both immediately (6:9-11) and when their prayers for the final defeat of the Beast are answered (19:11-21). The Beast aspires to universal control and allegiance from every **tribe, people, language and nation** (v. 7). But ultimately all nations belong to Christ (5:9). The necessity for decision is set out in black and white. One must give ultimate allegiance to either Christ or the Beast. One cannot be neutral. All except the saints go after the Beast, underlining the fact that apart from Christ people remain in the power of Satan and darkness (Col. 1:13; Eph. 2:1-3; Gal. 1:4; Acts 4:12).

The **book of life** (v. 8) is the heavenly roster of names of those destined to new life through the purchase of Christ's blood (5:9; see 3:5). As in 17:8, the phrase "from the creation of the world" modifies not "slain" but "written." Thus we read, "written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain." In the midst of persecution and the immense power of the Beast, the saints may find security in God's guarantee of their heavenly citizenship. Similar guarantees are found in 7:1-17; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27.

The exhortation to hear (v. 9) picks up on earlier exhortation in 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; and in the Gospels, Jesus' exhortations: Matt. 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; 7:16; 8:18; Luke 8:8; 14:35; Matt.

7:24, 26. Saints must take to heart the warning of Revelation, and be on the alert against the deceptions of the Beast as well as giving way out of fear.

Patient endurance (v. 10), believing in God's faithfulness and his triumph through Christ, enables the saints to pass through all distresses. God never promises that we will be free from suffering in this world; on the contrary, he repeatedly announces that it will come. But he promises sustenance. "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). (See 1:9.)

The False Prophet, 13:11-18

13:11-18 The beast from the earth, also called the False Prophet (16:13; 19:20; 20:10), functions as a propagandist for the Beast. His actions counterfeit the witness of the Holy Spirit (see Introduction: Counterfeiting)

In first-century Asia Minor, the main propagandists would have been priests of the emperor cult and the "Commune of Asia," a council of distinguished city representatives promoting loyalty to the emperor. In our day as well totalitarianism enlists propagandists. Just before the Second Coming counterfeit miracles will accompany the appearance of the lawless one (2 Thess. 2:9). The False Prophet embodies a repeatable pattern (see Introduction: Interpretation). Satan uses deceit as his main weapon (Rev. 12:9; 20:3). He uses human instruments and institutions to magnify and propagate his deceits.

We may then ask what are the principal means of deceit around us now. In an industrialized society, mass media, educational institutions, advertising, the whole of the "knowledge industry" offer the principal channels through which people learn and confirm their view of themselves and their world. In principle technologically enhanced communication and social organizations can support both truth and error, righteousness and wickedness. But in societies affected by the fall, all too often distortions of the truth invite people to pursue idols and simultaneously blind them to the realities of their idolatry. For example, the media may become filled with the presuppositions of a materialist worldview. What message results? God need not be mentioned except in expletives, since he is nonexistent, absent, or irrelevant. Humanity invents its own meanings. We are part of an evolutionary whole. Progress comes by freeing ourselves from a primitive past. Money, health, intelligence, beauty, and sexual pleasure give us the good life. And so Herbert Schlossberg (Idols for Destruction) finds himself attacking modern idols called "history," "humanity," "mammon," "nature," "power," even "religion" inhabiting our knowledge industry and floating through its channels of communication.

These ideas pervade the atmosphere. They are all the more insidious because they are "atmospheric." They tend to be assumed rather than overtly disputed. One receives the subtle impression that it is all obvious. Everyone who is informed, everyone who is "with it," has gone past the stage of questioning. In reality there never was a fundamental questioning, because the ideas seem so natural and inevitable. The average person is no more aware of them than the fish is aware of the water in which it has swum ever since birth. The few who are aware can still take comfort. They may say to themselves, "How could we possibly be wrong, when the miracles of modern science and technology show our superiority to the ideas of the past?"

Technology, then, becomes the worker of miraculous signs (13:14). The signs tells us that true power resides in the modern view of the world. Worship the power of the beast, the power of technocratic state organization, the power of the expert, because technology can work wonders like no one else.

The second beast is from the earth (v. 11), whereas the first is from the sea (v. 1). Together, then, they hint at the attempt to master the whole earth: sea and dry land. Interestingly, these two beasts are modeled after the two monsters in Job 40:15-41:34. Behemoth exercises power on land (Job 40:15-24) and leviathan on water (Job 41:1-34). The Ancient Near East produced multiple speculations about a land-monster and a sea-monster. Some Jews thought that the two monsters were now hidden, but would appear in the last days and be destroyed. Job is probably referring to the hippopotamus and the crocodile, but with incredibly charged, hyperbolic poetic imagery. Readers are invited to use these physical creatures as windows onto the nameless terrors of nightmares and the spiritual reality of the preternatural realm of demons. In Job, God is creator and therefore master of them all. So is he also in Revelation. In Revelation the pairing of the two beasts in this way increases the sense of their power and terror: they are superhuman, cosmic, ageless monsters. But simultaneously it proclaims their bounds: God has bounded them from the beginning, as Job indicates.

The second beast has **two horns like a lamb** (v. 11). He also, like the first, offers counterfeiting. The exercise of the authority of the first beast (v. 12) is the counterfeit analogue of the fact that Jesus sends the Holy Spirit as "another Counselor" with his authority (John 16:13-15). He promotes worship of the Beast, just as the Holy Spirit promotes worship of Christ (Rev. 13:12). He performs miraculous signs (v. 13), analogous to the Spirit-worked signs in the Book of Acts. Priests in the first century were not above working a little fakery to encourage people to come and patronize their temples. In the first century, the image (v. 14) is the image of the emperor set up in the local temple dedicated to the imperial cult. Now, it is the concrete thing through which the godlike power and presence is mediated and adored. For some people, the TV set!

All who refused to worship the image were **to be killed** (v. 15). Nebuchadnezzar threatened death to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego for not bowing down to his image (Dan. 3). Christians in the Roman Empire might be killed for treason, or disloyalty to the emperor, if they refused to participate in the imperial cult. Totalitarian governments of our time are seldom so crude. But the local government official, as an image of government power, requires total allegiance such as a Christian cannot give.

Successful modern democratic governments are not killing people literally. They do not need to, as long as their idol programs are so successful! They travel not toward paternal severity, but toward maternal smothering. The state undertakes to help you by stuffing you with what is good for you—according to its wonderfully "enlightened," beneficent judgment. But if you do not agree, you are socially unfit and maladapted. The old "you" must be "killed," socially speaking, by social engineering, in order that the new "you" may function as a upstanding, healthy citizen of the state. To this end, the state uses education, financial penalties, financial inducements, endless regulations, and bureaucrats overseeing and directing your decisions. No, we Christians in such a country do not feel the immediate threat of the sword. But untangling ourselves from the clinging web of idolatry is like death. For the web exists inside us as well as outside, in the ways in which we

have already, as members of our society, absorbed its godless assumptions. As verse 16 indicates, participation in the society is hardly possible without idolatry. The society regards the Christian as a misfit, a misanthrope, a victim of insanity. He does not share knowledge of the "obvious verities," and so cannot be trusted. Thus a consistent Christian will find it difficult to fit in and mix with pagan society. The difficulties may be subtle, as in "tolerant" modern democratic societies, or they may be blatant and harsh, as in the Roman Empire or modern totalitarian countries, where Christians may suffer literal confiscation of property.

What is **the mark** (vv. 16-17)? The mark of the Beast is a counterfeit for the seal of God's name on the saints (7:2-8; 14:1; cf. Ezek. 9; Deut. 6:8). The Beast owns those who are marked and they are his slaves (14:9; 19:20; 20:4). The mark denotes spiritual allegiance and ownership, both in the case of God's mark and in the case of the counterfeit by the Beast. In both cases the mark is at root spiritual rather than visible. The multitude of speculations about a visible mark are beside the point.

What about the number 666? The number 666 falls short of the divine completeness of seven. When we expect 777, we get a consistent falling short in 666. Thus 666 has an obvious symbolic value. But there may be a further association. We need first to understand that in both Hebrew and Greek a numerical value was associated with each letter of the alphabet. In Greek, A had value 1, B 2, I 10, K 20, and so on. The letters were sometimes used as a shorthand for numbers. Both Jews and pagans sometimes played arithmetical games with the numerical value of whole words. Christians found that the name Jesus had numerical value 888 in Greek. Hence, the number 666 also makes a contrast with the name of Jesus (cf. 14:1). Jesus is the Christ, who brings in the new creation on the eighth day. The Beast is the Antichrist, who counterfeits Christ but falls short.

Many have attempted to connect 666 with the numerical value of someone's name. But there are far too many possibilities. People may resort to transliterating or translating names into Hebrew or Greek as well as putting them in a Roman alphabet; people may use different forms of names, adding or deleting titles and abbreviations of titles and names. By such means people have succeeded in correlating the number with each of the main Roman emperors of the time: Nero, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian. The speculations about modern antichrists also continue to multiply. But such speculations miss the point. Revelation calls not for cleverness but for spiritual discernment.2

The 144,000, 14:1-5

The 144,000 represent the saints in their complete number (see 7:4-8). They form a priestly company (5:10) consecrated to offer praise to God on the holy mount. God affirms his ownership and protection by placing his mark on them, in contrast to the mark of the Beast in 13:16-18.
The **sound from heaven** is probably the sound of praise from the saints. Their loudness and exuberance reflects that loudness like thunder of God himself when he appears in theophany, as at Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:16; Ezek. 1:24; Rev. 1:10; 4:5; etc.). The **new song** (v. 3) picks up the theme from the Old Testament of singing new songs to celebrate a new day of victory for God (Pss. 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1). **No one could learn the song** except the 144,000, that is, the redeemed. The 144,000 symbolize all the people of God, every one of which is known and numbered by God. The dwellers on earth who have not been redeemed cannot participate. The experience of and participation in God's salvation gives us a special inner appreciation of God's goodness, greatness, and grace.

The 144,000 are described as **chaste**. Sexual imagery is used here to denote spiritual purity. Christ's faithful followers keep away from Babylon the Prostitute and are loyal to him exclusively, as his pure bride (19:7-8; Eph. 5:26-27). Purity in sexual behavior is of course included as one element in this comprehensive purity (1 Cor. 6:15-20).

Three Angelic Proclaimers, 14:6-11

Now come three announcements from three angelic beings. Because of their similarity in pattern, these three episodes belong together as a single symbolic history (14:6-11). This symbolic history is the 6th out of 7 (see Introduction: Structure). The 7th symbolic history includes the appearing of the Son of Man (14:14), that is, the Second Coming. Thematically, angels are placed just before this Coming. They give a final solemn warning concerning the coming judgment and the necessity of repenting if one is to escape judgment.

God may of course send extraordinary warnings just before and during the final crisis leading to the Second Coming. But the message has a point throughout the church age. Through the church and through preaching, not merely directly through literal angels, the Lord gives warning to the unrepentant world.

The first angel calls on all to repent (14:6-7). **Every nation, tribe, language and people** is one of many occurrences of a fourfold label for all human beings. The reach of the message to all nations fulfills the promise made to Abraham that all peoples will be blessed (Gen. 12:3). But curse also comes to those who curse Abraham, and now, in the last days, this curse falls on those not repenting in response to the gospel. As other parts of Revelation make clear, the gospel involves turning to Christ. But here the focus is on worshiping and fearing God. The prime sin of the nations is the refusal to worship the One who has created and sustained them (Rom. 1:18-32; Acts 14:15-17; 17:22-31). The coming of the gospel is not what creates guilt; people are already guilty for rebelling against God. The coming of the gospel shows the way of escape and return to fearing God, before it is too late: **the hour of his judgment has come** (v. 7). The normal division of the universe into three parts, heaven, dry land, and sea, becomes four parts when one distinguishes salt water from fresh. These four parts of the universe all receive judgments in the first four trumpets (8:7-12) and the first four bowls (16:1-9). The mention of the four parts here thus contains a subtle reminder of the fierceness of God's judgment against rebels.

The second angel announces the fall of Babylon, who seduced the nations. The center of false worship has fallen (see further development of this theme in chapters 17-18). Turn to true worship before it is too late. **Babylon the Great**, the great seductress, is further described in 17:1-19:10. She seduces people to **adulteries**. Sexual immorality as well as idolatry, which is spiritual adultery, were major temptations for the seven churches (see 2:20). But the effect, like that of drunkenness, is confusion of mind, shame, foolishness, and disgrace. See 17:2, 4; 18:3; 19:2; Jer. 51:7; Prov. 9:13-18.

The third angel elaborates on the fearsome judgment that comes to the unrepentant, the followers of the Beast. This threat is simultaneously an encouragement to the saints. It encourages them to hold fast even under intense suffering. Their suffering is but little in comparison with the wrath of God. It also shows that ultimate vindication will come. The Christian faith, which seems so small and puny to worldly eyes, will be shown to be true, and the worshipers of the Beast, who seem now

so secure because of the worldly might of the Roman Empire, will find all their false hopes come to nothing.

Those who worship the Beast **will be tormented with burning sulfur** (v. 10). The torment goes on forever: not only does the smoke rise forever, but the sufferers have no rest, no sabbath, no relief (v. 11). What do we do with this picture?

The idea of endless torment is abhorrent to modern Western sensibilities. It troubles many Christians as well as non-Christians, and causes not a few in our day to look for some escape from the apparent meaning of these verses. Let us consider carefully. The Christian ideal of love, and its leavening effect on the West, has sensitized us to the appalling nature of cruelty and torture. Pagan societies of the ancient world, before the coming of Christianity, were shockingly brutal against their enemies, and too few within these societies had much of a troubled conscience. How did Christianity change this situation? It showed that cruelty is heinous because it is practiced against people made in the image of God, people moreover who are or may become our brothers and sisters in Christ, people who may become fellow heirs of salvation. Secularization converted this love of neighbor into a wishy-washy sentimentality. It liked to dream that everybody is innocent and suffering is senseless. Thus, we have to separate between good and bad within modern attitudes.

Moreover, the Second Coming represents a radical change in the situation, in that the possibility of repenting comes to an end. We quite rightly train ourselves during this age to have a hopeful attitude even toward the most terrible sinner. We pray and expectantly hope for repentance. We learn to love our enemies. This response fits the character of this age, but does not fit the arena of the Second Coming. Moreover, during the present age we love and admire many things about pagans because, even in their rebellion, they display many admirable reflections of God's goodness. Our reactions may be proper *now*, but will change when we see undiluted wickedness in all its ugliness and hideousness. The Second Coming means the separation of good and evil. It means a separation not only of good and evil *people*, but a separation between good and evil *within* people. In evil people, evil comes to full fruition. Goodness remains only with God and those enjoying his blessing. It is hard for us to picture just *how* evil evil may actually become.

We must let God be God. He knows what he is doing, when he displays mercy and when he displays justice. We must therefore continue to take the teaching in Revelation seriously. We must stir ourselves up to reckon with the fact that God is indeed a God of justice and of punishment for evil. In repentance and turning to Christ lies the only escape from hell.

(On the Beast and his mark, see 13:1-10 and 13:16.)

Interlude: Relief for the Saints, 14:12-13

In the midst of these threats of judgment comes a message to the saints. Persevere (see 1:9). Do not cave in to the temptations of the surrounding society and its idolatries, however powerful and seductive they may appear to worldly eyes. Your reward will yet come (v. 13). Unlike the worshipers of the Beast you will have rest.

The Appearing of One like a Son of Man, 14:14-20

14:14-20 is the last of 7 symbolic histories. It depicts the Second Coming as the harvest over which the Son of Man presides (cf. Matt. 13:36-43; Joel 3:12-16). The "one like a son of man" is Jesus Christ (1:13; Dan. 7:13-14).

Two harvests are described, grain (14:14-16) and grapes (14:17-20). These are perhaps two aspects of the same events of judgment. Or the grain harvest may be the harvest of the righteous (Luke 3:17), followed by the harvest of the wicked in 14:17-20. The main background is the picture of final divine harvest in Joel 3:12-16. In Joel grain is harvested with a sickle, and grapes are trampled in the winepress; both carry the primary connotation of punishment. But in Revelation specific connotations of punishment come only with the second, grape harvest, thrown **into the great winepress of God's wrath** (v. 19). It is thus possible that the grain harvest may symbolize the harvest of the righteous (as in 14:1-5). More likely, the background from Joel gives us the main clue to interpretation. Both grain and grape harvests are directly primarily the judging the wicked. As in Joel, deliverance for God's people is symbolized in other ways, but still comes in conjunction with the judgment of the wicked.

The Seven Bowls, 15:1-16:21

The cycle of seven bowls of God's wrath composes the fourth cycle of visions leading up to the Second Coming (see Introduction: Structure). The opening scene of worship (15:1-16:1) calls to mind the worship around God's throne in 4:1-5:14. The overcomers rejoice in God's presence (15:2). Seven resplendent angels receive bowls from the presence of God in the temple. The bowls symbolize the cup of God's wrath, which in the Old Testament makes the nations drunk (cf. Isa. 51:17, 20, 22; Jer. 25:15-29; Lam. 4:21; Ezek. 23:31-34; Hab. 2:16; Rev. 14:10; 16:19). The bowls are poured out at God's command (16:1), resulting in seven last plagues. The plagues lead up and include the Second Coming, since "with them God's wrath is completed" (15:1).

The seven bowls show notable similarities with the seven trumpets. The first four bowls, like the first four trumpets, result in devastation on the four major regions of creation: dry land, sea, fresh water, and sky. Like the trumpets, the bowls are reminiscent of the Mosaic plagues against Egypt. But the bowls result in more severe judgments than did the trumpets. The trumpet judgments typically affected a third of the total, but the bowls affect the whole.

These bowls symbolize the judgments of God against evildoers. The general pattern may include both the judgments against the godless Roman Empire and the final crisis leading up to the Second Coming (see Introduction: Interpretation). The symbolism also asserts that, throughout this age, God may at his pleasure send judgments of utmost devastation on those who rebel against him.

The Origin of the Bowls in God and his Worship, 15:1-8

As we progress through the Book of Revelation, the visions focus more and more on the climactic judgments of the Second Coming. The judgments of the 7 bowls reminds us of the nearness of the last things not only by speaking of **the seven last plagues**, but indicating the culmination of the wrath of God: **with them God's wrath is completed**.

The events unfold beside **a sea of glass mixed with fire** (v. 2). The sea is the same as in 4:6. We see the events as issuing from God's presence and his throne. Terrible disasters do not come by accident, but according to the just judgment of God. They are harbingers of the final judgment of

the Second Coming. As in 4:6, the sea is reminiscent not only of the Red Sea crossing but God's power to subdue the chaos of the sea. The Israelites stood on the far shore of the Red Sea and observed the death of their enemies through God's power. In the last days victorious saints likewise stand on the far side of their troubles and the persecutions of the Beast. As in 14:3, they take up a new song of victory. But it repeats the old **song of Moses**, in that God's final victory recapitulates the earlier victory at the Red Sea (see Exod. 15). The plagues that follow in Revelation 16 are reminiscent of the plagues that came on Egypt.

The saints praise God for the greatness and awesomeness of his power, but also for his justice in these powerful, miraculous acts (v. 3). God's acts of judgment are never arbitrary or spiteful, but just payment for evil deeds. Cf. 15:4; 16:5, 7; 19:2, 11. See also 14:10-12.

When God manifests his greatness in his deeds, people from all nations see who he is. They may nevertheless continue unrepentant, as the Egyptians did during the plagues of the exodus. But there may also be a favorable response. Nations formerly in the darkness of paganism see the light of God's revelation (Isa. 60:1-3). The coming of **all nations**, fulfilled in 21:24-26, answers the promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:3).

The vision now shifts to **the temple** (vv. 5-8). Old Testament images of tabernacle, altar, temple, throne, cloud, fire, and thunder all converge in Revelation to represent in various fashion the presence of God in his splendor, might, and beauty (see on 4:1-5:14). The bowls are moved from the temple area into the hands of the angels who will pour them out. The imagery indicates again that God is the origin and sovereign over the judgments that will follow.

The angels are **dressed in clean, shining linen** (v. 6), which is Old Testament priestly clothing (Exod. 28:42; Lev. 16:4). The holiness of God's judgments is thereby emphasized (see 15:3-4). The four living creatures refer us back to 4:6.

Smoke (v. 8) or thick cloud frequently accompanies God's presence, especially when he is angry. The associations include Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:9, 16, 18; 20:18) and the visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel (Isa. 6:4; Ezek. 1:4). Cf. Num. 12:5; Pss. 18:8, 11; 74:1.

Pouring out the First Four Bowls, 16:1-9

A loud voice comes from the temple (v. 1), indicating that the events take place according to God's instructions and plan.

The first angel pours his bowl **on the land**, the first of the four major regions of the universe. The plagues fall not on all human beings, but on the ungodly: **people who had the mark of the beast and worshipped his image** (v. 2). (On the image of the Beast, see 13:14-15.) The sores are like the Egyptian plague of boils (Exod. 9:8-12).

The second plague is like the Egyptian plague of blood (Exod. 7:14-24).

With the third plague, God's true servants praise God for his justice, taking up the theme of 15:3. As with the *lex talionis* (Exod. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21; Pss. 7:16; 9:15-16; Obad. 15; Matt. 7:1-2; etc.), the punishment fits the crime.

The fourth plague (vv. 8-9), scorching with fire, corresponds to Old Testament language of judgment by fire (e.g., Joel 2:3; Isa. 66:15; Mal. 4:1-2). Despite the severity of the suffering people refuse to repent (vv. 9, 11). The vision represents people in the hardness of their heart. Rather than taking the warning to heart, they use it as an occasion to be angry with God.

Pouring out the Last Bowls, 16:10-21

The fifth plague is like the Egyptian plague of darkness (Exod. 10:21-23). The repeated refusal to repent (compare v. 9) prepares us for the last two plagues. Nothing remains now but people in their anger and cursing to attempt a direct assault on God (plague 6) and for God to put down the rebellion for good (plague 7).

The sixth plague (vv. 12-16) shows the preparations for the final battle, the battle of Armageddon. Aspects of this same battle have already been described in one way or another: the kings and all kinds of people cluster together in 6:15; the army beyond the Euphrates is summoned in 9:14; the Beast wars against the saints in 11:7 and 13:1-10. Further descriptions occur in 17:13-14; 19:11-21; and 20:7-10. The later passages describe the battle with increasing detail and precision, all based on the eschatological battle of Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38-39. Throughout the church age there are times of intense confrontation between God and the forces of Satan (cf. 2:10, 13), but the most intense comes at the Second Coming (19:11-21).

Not all interpreters agree that these various verses describe the *same* battle. But once we appreciate the thematic concerns of Revelation, and the pattern of seven cycles all leading up to the Second Coming, the thematic unity of the various passages becomes a strong pointer to their inward unity. After all, how many last battles can there be, **on the great day of God Almighty** (16:14; cf. 6:16-17; 15:1!)?

The Euphrates river dries up to allow for the movement of great armies, as in 9:14. The Dragon, the Beast, and the False Prophet appear together (v. 13). The False Prophet is the same as the beast from the earth in 13:11-18. Together the three form a counterfeit of the holy Trinity (see Introduction: Counterfeiting). They are not only demonic in character, but, at this climactic point, they become generators of further demonic spirits, in the form of frogs. Miraculous signs occur, as in 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10 and 13:13-15, to deceive the reprobate. They are all too willing to be deceived because they have already rejected God's truth (2 Thess. 2:10-11; John 3:18-20).

They **gather them for the battle**. In the climactic battle all the forces of wickedness are assembled to make war against the warrior Lamb (17:14). The imagery alludes to the battle between God and Pharaoh in Exodus 15:2, but the panorama is cosmic in scope. In Hebrew, **Armageddon** means "mount of Megiddo." In ancient Israel, Megiddo was a key city overseeing a major travel route between the great kingdoms of Mesopotamia and Egypt. Huge armies could assemble in the neighboring Plain of Esdraelon. Moreover, God's people had experienced decisive battles there (Judges 5:19; 2 Chron. 35:20-22). Thus it is a fitting symbol for the location of the climactic battle.

The name is symbolic, and so cannot be used as a basis for speculations about geographical details of the final battle. In any case, the final battle is preeminently *spiritual* in character. Attempts to correlate it with the maneuvers of particular national armies miss the point. The battle is between the servants of God and the enemies of God, not between two earthly nations. Because

of the missionary expansion of the church, nearly all nations now have in their midst both Christians and non-Christians.

The seventh bowl (vv. 17-21) brings the cycle of judgments to an end. Like the other cycles, this one ends with the Second Coming (see Introduction: Structure), though the symbols of the Second Coming are not as obvious as in some other cases. Note the following features: (a) 15:1 already told readers that the end of the wrath of God would come with the seventh bowl. (b) The removal of all islands and mountains in 16:20 corresponds to the final shaking of the earth in 6:14 and 20:11 (cf. Heb. 12:26-27). (c) Elsewhere the fall of Babylon is immediately followed by the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:1-10). (d) In 17:14-17 the fall of Babylon is immediately associated with the final battle, which takes place at the Second Coming (19:11-21). Moreover, the final battle was imminent in 16:16. (e) In Revelation the imagery of the final battle is repeatedly drawn from Ezekiel 38-39 (see note on 16:14). 16:17-21 fits into this practice by grouping together an earthquake, the overturning of the mountains, and hail, as in Ezek. 38:19-23. Hence it describes the divine plague-judgments accompanying the battle; a description of other aspects of the battle is delayed until 19:11-21 in keeping with the dramatic plan of Revelation.

1 See Beale, Revelation, 635.

2 Beale, Revelation, 718-728.

Babylon the Prostitute, 17:1-19:10

In the 5th major cycle of judgments, 17:1-19:10, Babylon the prostitute appears, representing the seductions of the world (17:4; 18:3). The destruction of Babylon goes together thematically with the destruction of the other primary agents of wickedness. We see the destruction of the Beast and the False Prophet in 19:11-21 and the destruction of Satan in 20:7-10. It is better to see these three destructive, judgmental episodes as running thematically parallel rather than being in strict chronological succession. Together they make up the final three cycles of judgment within the total structure of Revelation's 7 cycles of judgment (see Introduction: Structure).

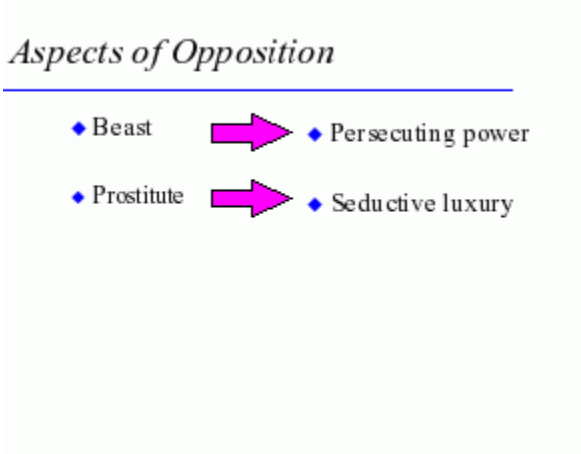
The corruptions of Babylon contrast with the purity of the bride of the Lamb, 19:7-9. Babylon sums up in herself the worship of the godless world. By contrast, the bride, the church, represents the worshipers of the true God. Just as Satan, the Beast, and the False Prophet form a counterfeit Trinity, Babylon is a counterfeit church, seducing the world to allegiance to the counterfeit Trinity (see Introduction: Counterfeiting).

Seven messages of judgment on Babylon are arranged into larger groups: three angelic messages of doom (17:7-18; 18:1-3; 18:4-8), three laments by those committed to Babylon (18:9-10, 11-17a, 17b-19), and a climactic pronouncement of the permanence of her fall (18:21-24). (See Introduction: Structure, under Rhetorical Structure of Revelation.)

Messages of Judgment on Babylon

passage	speaker	message

17:7-18	angel (with bowl)	fall of Beast and Babylon
18:1-3	bright angel with authority	fall of Babylon
18:4-8	voice from heaven	come out from Babylon
18:9-10	kings of the earth	lament
18:11-17a	merchants of the earth	lament
18:17b-19	sailors	lament
18:21-24	a mighty angel	permanent fall of Babylon, illustrated with a millstone

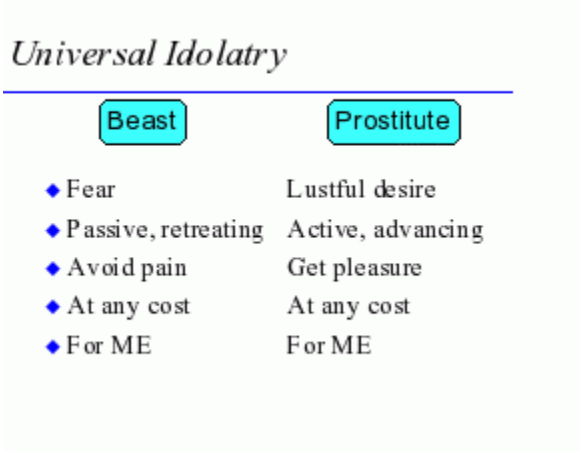


Satan attacks the saints in two main ways. The Beast attacks with power and persecution, endeavoring to destroy the witness of the saints and force them to worship the Beast. Babylon attacks with seduction, endeavoring to destroy the purity of the saints.

Babylon stands for the city of Rome with its immorality. For the seven churches of Revelation, Rome was the source of all manner of idolatry—not only the worship of the Roman emperor, but the structures of an idolatrous society. The paganism of the cities of Asia Minor made each city into a small manifestation of Babylon. Full economic and social participation (13:17!) involved attendance at idol feasts and pagan religious celebrations. Babylon is attractive because she promises pleasures associated both with sexual intercourse and with economic prosperity. Both

the clothing of Babylon in 17:4 and the laments in 18:9-20 indicate that much of the attraction of Babylon lies in her wealth and luxury. The pagans in Asia looked to Rome as the source and guarantee of economic well-being and material comfort. They gave political allegiance and worship to the Roman Emperor, not only because they feared the power of Rome, but because they loved the economic benefits that they received from her.

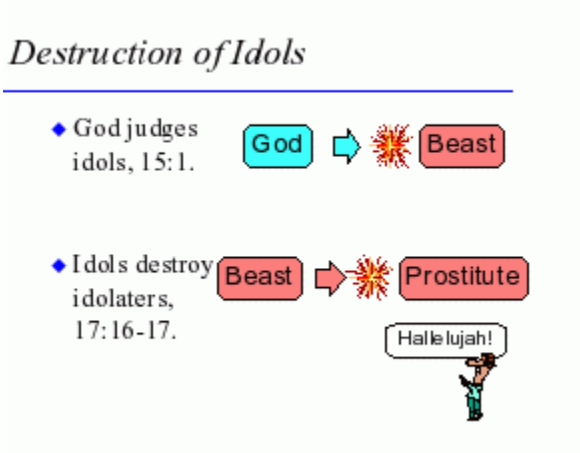
Worship of the emperor was an expected expression of political allegiance. Pagans called Christians atheists because they did not worship the many gods, and called them haters of humankind because they withdrew from compromised forms of social life (cf. 1 Pet. 4:3-4; 2:12). In reaction to this pressure, even some professing Christians argued that participation in idolatrous feasts and sexual immorality were acceptable (Rev. 2:12, 20; cf. 1 Cor 6:12-20). The woman Jezebel in 2:20-23 was a key seducer whose work is generalized and more deeply symbolized in Babylon the prostitute (compare 2:21-22 with 17:2).



The cities of the first century are not alone is being centers of seduction to idolatry, to greed, to materialism, and to sexual immorality. Our modern cities with their wealth, false religions, and sexual exploitation are modern forms of Babylon. The media and their advertisements can bring into our homes and thoughts the seducing message of worshiping money, sex, power, and pleasure. Advertisements tell us that satisfaction and meaningful living can be found if only we buy the latest product. They say, “if only you have enough money and toys and sexual pleasures, you will be fulfilled.” Thus the symbolism of Babylon is capable of multiple embodiments, including a final, climactic embodiment just before the Second Coming (see Introduction: Interpretation).

Analogues to Babylon also exist in the recesses of our hearts. The Beast commands his subjects through fear; the Prostitute seduces by playing on our lusts with the enticements of illicit pleasures. However subtle may be the remaining sinful tendencies in our hearts, they take these two forms, of fear and of lust. We capitulate and compromise with sin either through fear or through lust. We fear suffering and shame. Or we lust, we have unbridled desire for whatever it is that has made our hearts captive. Sex, wealth, fame, power, health, beauty can all become idols, objects for our lust. But how foolish it all is! Not only will it come to nothing, because of God’s judgment. It is but nothing even now, because it forsakes God who is the true object both of fear and of proper desire. The true remedy is in God himself. In the new Jerusalem God grants the sexual pleasure of the marriage supper of the Lamb, the wealth of streets paved with gold, the fame of being known by

God and having his name on one's forehead, the power of the throne, and health of no sickness or death, and beauty of the architecture of the new city. The objects of our lust are only tawdry counterfeits of what God has created out of his own bounty, and what he will bestow in unfathomable fullness!



Much of the imagery fits well the character of Jerusalem before its destruction. In refusing to accept the Messiah she became a prostitute, as had happened in the Old Testament (Luke 21:9-18; 11:47-51; Isa. 1:21; Ezek. 16; 23; Hos. 2). 11:8 links Jerusalem with Sodom and Egypt. A few interpreters have therefore argued in favor of identifying Babylon the prostitute with Jerusalem. But Jerusalem was only one instance of a society seducing people away from true worship. In Old Testament times ancient Babylon was another, and accordingly Revelation takes up the language of the Old Testament prophetic condemnations of Babylon and Tyre (Jer. 50-51; Ezek. 27). 17:9 and 18 are most naturally understood as allusions to Rome, not Jerusalem.

We should remember that the false prophetess named Jezebel appeared already in 2:20-23. Jezebel represents the same principle that Babylon represents on a world-wide scale. The seduction to idolatry arises not only from outside the church, from an idolatrous culture of the Roman Empire, but from *inside* the church as well. People who claim to be Christians try to convince us that compromise with worldly idolatry is really O.K. Thus, in our day, seduction comes not only from TV advertisements that would promote materialism, but from religious false teachers. Theological liberalism intends to make peace with many ideas of the world. Health-and-wealth theology claims that we can be rich and healthy if only we follow recipes alleged to come from the Bible. The shallow pastor or counselor offers versions of self-help pop psychology rather than the message of sin and redemption as the remedy for our frustrations. Apparently orthodox circles may imitate from a distance the latest the styles of the world.

The prostitute is borne up by a hideous beast, evidently the same Beast as in 13:1-10. The Beast, representing the Roman Empire, supports the city of Rome in its luxurious idolatry. It also spreads the practices of Rome throughout the Empire. Eventually, however, the Beast turns against the Prostitute and destroys her (17:16-17). The rapacious powers of Roman government and the Roman legions destroy prosperity, and eventually the military powers of surrounding tribes destroy the city of Rome completely. The lesson from Roman times is generalizable: idolatrous states end up

destroying the very powers, riches, privileges, and people that they start out supporting. False worship is self-destructive.

When the destruction of false worship is complete (17:1-18:24), the true worshipers, the bride of the Lamb, stand out in their splendor and joy (19:1-10).

Introducing Babylon, 17:1-6

Even at the beginning of the section on Babylon, the note of punishment and downfall becomes evident. The angel is the same as one involved in terrible judgments in the preceding cycle, hinting that further judgment is the subject of this section. John sees not simply a vision of Babylon, but her **punishment** (v. 1). Her punishment is simultaneously an indictment of all who associated with her; they are corrupted by her corruptions, and hence in a measure they will share her fate (v. 2; see 14:8-11). The many waters (v. 1) stand for many nations (v. 15), indicating the scope of her corrupting influence.

John the seer moves through the Spirit to a new vantage-point for the vision (v. 2). Such transports occur only at 1:10, 4:1, 21:9, underlining the significance of the revelation that will be given.

The Prostitute symbolizes the worldly city (v. 18) and the opulence possible through the power and complexity of cities. Ironically, the scene of her judgment is **in the desert** (v. 3), in austerity. The promises of luxury and pleasure prove in the end to be vain. But at the moment she is impressively luxurious (v. 4).

The woman sits **on a scarlet beast** (v. 3), whose features match the Beast of 13:1-8. In a word, the Prostitute and the Beast cooperate. In the Roman Empire, the idolatry of imperial power (the Beast) undergirded the idolatry of pleasure and wealth (the Prostitute). State power made possible the amassing of wealth. So today people invest hopes in state power, whenever it promises to deliver utopian peace and prosperity. Communist governments engaged in all kinds of brutalities, and yet received people's allegiance, because totalitarian power was supposedly a necessary means to the utopian communist society of the future.

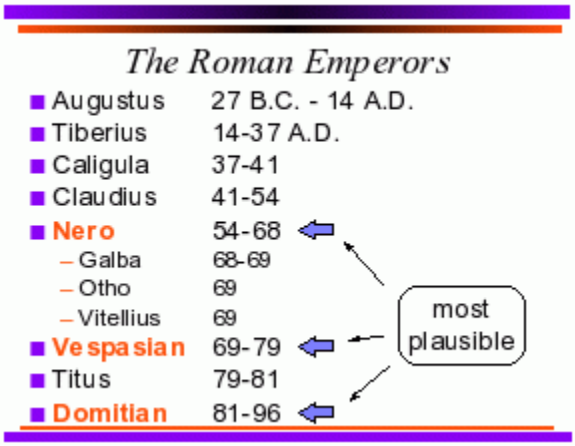
The woman is dressed in the ostentatious garb of a prostitute (v. 4, cf. Prov. 7:16-17). She combines the lure of sexual pleasure with the lure of luxury. Sensual pleasures of all kinds are available in the city in relative anonymity. But she is deceitful. The long-term consequences are entirely unpleasant. The golden cup looks good on the outside, but inside it has **abominable things and the filth of her adulteries** (v. 4). "For the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23; cf. Prov. 7:27). (On the spiritual dimensions of adultery, see 2:20.)

She is called **Babylon** (v. 5), indicating the essential unity of all manifestations of the worldly city. Babel (Gen. 11:1-9), Belshazzar's Babylon (Dan. 5; 7:4; Jer. 50-51), imperial Rome (1 Pet. 5:13), the seven cities of Asia (Rev. 1:11), papal Rome, and modern worldly cities can in fact all be rolled together, because the principle is the same. The kingdom of God is opposed by the kingdom of this world (Rev. 11:15; 11:8). Her most heinous crime is participation in the persecution of saints (v. 6).

Angelic Message concerning War and the Destruction of Babylon, 17:7-18

As in other cases in Revelation and in apocalyptic literature, angels explain the significance of aspects of mysterious visions (v. 7; cf. 7:13-14; 10:9-11; Dan. 10:10-12:4; Zech. 1:9; 1:18-21; 2:1-

2; 4:4-7; etc.). The Beast **once was, now is not, and will come** ... (v. 8). The description is a counterfeit of the sovereignty of God, which is proclaimed in 1:4, 8; 4:8. "Now is not" indicates that persecution is now at an ebb, but with rise with renewed intensity in the future. The Beast represents a repeated pattern of persecution, as in the four successive beasts of Daniel 7 (see 13:1-10). As in 13:8, the Beast captures the allegiance of all except the elect, those whose names have **been written in the book of life**. The names were written **from the creation of the world**, indicating the absolute sovereignty of God and his control over salvation from the beginning (4:11; compare John 6:37-39). The course of history holds no surprises for God. He knows the end from the beginning, for he is the Alpha and the Omega (1:8; 21:6; 22:13). We are saved not because of superior goodness or intelligence, but through the goodness of God, who has undertaken to redeem us from the rest of humanity (14:4). In spiritual warfare there is no neutral position. Ultimately you are either for God or against him.



Rome was known as the city built on **seven hills**. At the time that John wrote, Rome was the principal embodiment of Babylon the worldly city. But who are the **seven kings**, five of whom **have fallen**? According to one interpretation, if Revelation was written in about 67 A.D., these five may be the first five Roman emperors, beginning with Julius Caesar. The sixth is then Nero, the currently reigning emperor. But in that case the history of the Empire subsequent to Nero presents us with nothing but problems. After Nero came Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, in 68 A.D., the "year of three emperors." One may not simply ignore them or skip them in order to arrive at Vespasian (69-79 A.D.) and the time of the fall of Jerusalem (70 A.D.). The sixth head is clearly near the end, and is to be succeeded by at most two more manifestations. Hence, this whole line of reasoning is off the track. The five who have fallen simply represents an indefinite number of previous emperors. The presence of the sixth indicates in symbolic fashion that Christians are near the end, but not quite there. The Beast itself is **an eighth king** (v. 11). Since there are only seven heads, the verse is not claiming that the Beast is an eighth head. Rather, the Beast symbolizes, in final manifestation, a power analogous to that of the seven.

What then are the **ten horns** (v. 12)? The number ten goes back through 17:7 and 13:1 to Daniel 7:7, 24. But the Beast of Revelation cannot simply be identified with the fourth beast of Daniel. Rather, he is a composite, summing up characteristics of all four of Daniel's beasts. In Revelation the ten horns are kingly confederates of the Beast. In view of 16:12, 14, 16; 19:19; 20:8; the political powers beyond the borders of the Roman Empire are most directly in mind. Rome was eventually

overrun by barbarian tribes. But the picture rises beyond the limitations of Rome and opens up a picture of the final battle in which the Beast will enlist large-scale assistance. The Beast, as an antichrist figure, enlists many other powers who cooperate with him. As arch rebels against the Lord, they undertake a final, climactic battle against the Lord and his Anointed (Ps. 2:2; Acts 4:26). The details of the battle unfold in 19:11-21.

Peoples, multitudes, nations and languages (v. 15) reiterates the cosmic scope of the conflict (see on 5:9).

Ironically, God uses evil powers to destroy one another. The Beast and his cohorts turn against the Prostitute (vv. 16-17). Idolatry is all its forms crumbles and fails. Those disappointed with the failure of their idols may turn on the idols and take vengeance. The pattern proved true in the Roman Empire, in that military might, which for a long time upheld the Empire, in the end destroyed it. The same pattern holds for every manifestation of Satan's works throughout this age.

God is the ultimate agent behind the destruction (v. 17). In the midst of trials, the saints are assured that God is in control even of this appalling conflict.

Second Angelic Message, Announcing Babylon's Fall, 18:1-3

18:1-24 contains many allusions to Jeremiah 50-51 (the fall of Babylon) and Ezekiel 27 (the fall of Tyre).

An angel announces the fall of Babylon (compare 14:8). Because of his exalted commission, the angel's splendor reflects that of God himself (10:1; 1:16). As in Jerermiah 50:39, Babylon becomes utterly desolate. Unlike Jerusalem in the exile, not even a remnant or shadow of the original city is left. It is not fit for human habitation, but only for wild animals (Isa. 13:20-22). Since the whole picture is symbolic, the usual desert animals of Jeremiah 50:39 and Isaiah 13:20-22 are replaced by **every unclean and detestable bird**, the uncleanness of which stands for the spiritual uncleanness of Babylon. The unclean birds in turn symbolize unclean spirits.

All the nations, their kings, and their merchants are implicated, because Babylon has seduced them (cf. 14:8; 17:2). She is not only immoral herself, but has entrapped others, thereby multiplying the guilt (cf. 2:20; Rom. 1:32).

Third Angelic Message, Warning Saints to Come Out, 18:4-8

A heavenly voice commands the saints to come out, that is, to be separate from Babylon's immorality. Purity and spiritual separation from worldliness are a repeated theme in the Bible (Isa. 48:20; 52:11; Jer. 50:8; 51:6, 45; 2 Cor. 6:17). When the temptations are subtle, as they frequently are in modern societies, vigilance, watchfulness, and understanding of the true nature of spiritual war are necessary. Revelation as a whole summons us to be aware of Satan's schemes (2 Cor. 2:11).

Her sins are piled up to heaven, in an ironic reminiscence of the plan for the tower of Babel to reach to heaven (Gen. 11:4; Jer. 51:9). Fame and power are vain if they are achieved through sinning.

As in 16:5-6, judgment fits the nature of the offense (vv. 6-7; Exod. 21:23-25). Fire (v. 8) is a symbol of God's consuming judgment (see Jer. 50:32; Mal. 4:1; Isa. 66:15-16; etc.).

Laments from Friends of Babylon, 18:9-19

Revelation illustrates the wide-ranging scope of Babylon's work, and the meaning of her downfall, by picturing the reactions of her friends. Kings, merchants, and sailors have been seduced to worship the luxury of Babylon. All in their way admire and profit from her. They are terrified by the destruction that they see, and stand far off, out of fear of getting caught in the destruction (vv. 10, 15, 17). But they do not learn repentance. Instead, they look back longingly to the earlier time of her prosperity, even as Lot's wife looked back longingly at Sodom and Gomorrah.

Cases of hardened wickedness take this very pattern. Even when people know that they are sinning, and when they know that destruction follows, they cannot bear to give up their sins. They cannot give up the pleasures or wealth that they obtain from sin.

The catalog of luxuries in 18:11-14 makes clear how people may indulge themselves at the expense of others ("bodies and souls of men," v. 13). Other people, merchants and sailors, may admire the luxury, but are most interested in the profit that they get from supplying the luxuries to others (vv. 15, 19). In the context of the Roman Empire the picture was literally true. The powerful ("kings of the earth") grew rich through the concentration of power in the Roman Empire, and they built their pleasure estates on the backs of slaves. Merchants and sailors stood to profit from the trade in luxury items.

Analogous possibilities still offer themselves in modern societies. Those with power, whether in positions in government, industry, commerce, or entertainment, grow rich, frequently through unscrupulous practices. Others profit from serving those in power. Typically such people cannot bear to see a change in the status quo, for it threatens the comfort of their position. But the righteous love righteousness more than any amount of earthly comfort and prosperity.

The powerful weep to see the end of the power to exercise wickedness; but the proper reaction is rejoicing (v. 20; 19:1-4). Modern societies teach us to love comfort and to abhor all destruction. But this modern attitude is nothing but a false sentimentality. Wickedness needs destruction. It is an offense to God primarily, but also to those who are oppressed under it (18:13). The saints rejoicing is quite proper. Modern critics may claim that Revelation's morality is "substandard," but the claim only shows the substandard character of modern criticism!

Final Announcement of Irrevocable Destruction, 18:20-24

In the final, 7th message of destruction on Babylon, the announcing angel dwells on the irrevocably permanent character and the completeness of the destruction. Babylon will never again have any power of resources with which to bring her evils on the world. The destruction of Babylon is thus a fitting prelude to the vision of a new heaven and a new earth, free from all trouble (21:4).

In a parallel with Jeremiah 51:63-64, the finality of Babylon's fall is depicted by the irreversible act of throwing a large stone into the sea. Then follows a long list announcing the permanent cessation of all kinds of activity (compare Jer. 25:10, predicting the fall of Jerusalem). The heaping up of phrases

proclaims like a death knell the surety of her end. The passage closes, fittingly, with a final reminder of the necessity and justice of her judgment: she was guilty of the blood of martyrs (v. 24).

The Pure Bride, Antithetical to Babylon, 19:1-10

The triumph of the pure bride is contrasted with the destruction of the corrupt false church (Babylon). Note the repeated hallelujahs (1, 3, 4, 5, 6). The roar from heaven imitates the thunder of God's own voice (see 2-3). We are probably supposed to think of the entire heavenly company as participating, as in 18:20: angelic beings and human saints from Old and New Testament times. The heavenly company rejoices when wickedness is destroyed and righteousness established (see on 18:20). The judgment is just, fitting Babylon's crimes (see on 15:3).

The description singles out **the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures**, the most prominent angelic servants from 4:4, 6. The focus is on the creatures and their worship, but we are not to forget the God of heaven and earth who is in the center of the picture in Revelation 4. The final celebration of God's victory fittingly takes place before his presence, in the company of the heavenly host (Heb. 12:22-24).

In verse 5 a **voice came from the throne**, possibly an angelic voice, but in any case representing an expression of God's will. The saints respond, in joyful obedience and at the same time with heart-felt spontaneity. God's triumph is complete, and his triumph also means profound satisfaction for his saints.

In fact, there is a **wedding** (v. 7). The wedding imagery expresses the intimacy, love, and joy between Christ and his people. It consummates the commitments expressed earlier in Scripture (Hos. 2:19-20; Isa. 54:5-8; Eph. 5:26-27). The wedding feast, the consummation of blessing and satisfaction, contrasts pointedly with the horrific feast of 19:17-18. Everyone will participate in one or the other feast.

The fine linen represents the **righteous acts of the saints**. The saints are distinguished from the world by their righteous acts (2 Thess. 1:5; Matt. 25:31-46; 5:16). At the same time, these acts are not the product of autonomous effort, but planned and empowered by God (Eph. 2:10; Phil 2:12-13).

As at several points, Revelation underlines the trustworthiness and certainty of God's word (21:5; 22:6; cf. 1:2,5). The angel bears a divine message. And as one of the highest creaturely servants of God, he reflects God's splendor. John is overwhelmed with the weight of it all, and in confusion starts to worship the mediating angel (v. 10; cf. 22:9). The angel therefore reminds him that the angels also are servants, alongside all Christians (cf. Heb. 1:14).

The Appearing of Christ and the Final Battle, 19:11-21

Christ appears as the divine warrior to wage final war against all the enemies of God, headed up by the Beast and the False Prophet. Christ's holy attributes contrast markedly with the unholy counterfeit attributes of the Beast (13:1-10). This final war brings to a climax all the wars that God has waged on behalf of his people (Exod. 15:2; Deut. 20; Hab. 3:8-15; Isa. 59:16-18; Ezek. 38-39; Zech. 12:1-9; 14:3-5) and consummates the triumph achieved by Christ on the cross (John 12:31; Col. 2:15; Rev. 5:9-10; 12:10-11).

Some have interpreted the imagery as a reference to the spread of Christ's rule through submission to the gospel. But the parallels with 16:14, 16; 17:14; and 20:7-10 show that the final battle is primarily in view (see on 16:14 and 16:17-21). 19:11-21 constitutes the sixth cycle of judgments leading to the Second Coming (see Introduction: Structure). In the later cycles the imagery concentrates more and more intensively on the Second Coming and its immediate precursors. In this cycle all the events are actually part of the Second Coming. But, as is typical of Revelation, they bring into full manifestation spiritual principles of war that have been operative throughout the church age (1 John 5:4-5; Eph. 6:10-20). At the end Jesus Christ is revealed fully as who he always is (22:13; Heb. 13:8).

The Appearing of Christ, 19:11-16

Heaven stands **open**. God reveals his presence not merely to John the seer, as in 4:1, but to the whole world of humanity. The appearance of the divine warrior in his majesty must mean the end of the battle and the destruction of all enemies before him.

Christ bears worthy names (vv. 11-12, 16), in contrast to the blasphemous names on the Beast (13:1). During this age he has been the faithful and true witness (1:5), identifying with the suffering and martyrdom of his saints that witness on earth (cf. 11:7). At his Coming he appears as the faith and true warrior and *judge* (cf. Isa. 11:4). The wars of earthly armies typically leave much unjust suffering and destruction in their wake. This war, however, is utterly just, because of the supreme power and justice of its leader.

Other aspects of the vision also testify to his worthiness and authority for the task. The **eyes like blazing fire**, recalling 1:14 and 2:18, affirm Christ's ability to see and judge human hearts and not merely outward appearance (2:23; Isa. 11:3-5; 1 Sam. 16:7). The **crowns** indicate the legitimate kingly authority that he has from the Father. The name that no one knows (v. 12) indicates that the full and surprising aspects of his coming are still a mystery to all. It may also remind us of his transcendence, his deity (cf. Judges 13:18, 22). The name **Word of God**, as in John 1:1, reminds us of his role of power in creation (Gen. 1:3; Ps. 33:6) and providence (Ps. 147:15; Lam. 3:37-38; Heb. 1:3). By virtue of his divine and his Lordship over all, he has ability to wrap up in final form the history that he has ruled over from the beginning (Isa. 11:4).

The significance of the **robe dipped in blood** is ambiguous. Some think that Christ's own blood, the blood the redeems the saints, is in view (5:9). This view is possible, because Christ's sacrifice is the key to the working out of God's plan for all of history, including its consummation (5:2-6). But the picture developed in 19:13 has close affinities with Isaiah 63:2-3, where God as the divine warrior spatters his garment with the blood of the enemies whom he tramples in the winepress (as in Rev. 19:15). The context in Revelation 19 is one where Christ destroys his enemies in blood, not one where he redeems the saints. Hence, the connection with Isaiah 63:2-3 is the significant one.

The armies of heaven (v. 14) imitate their leader. They too ride of white horses, and they have his purity. In the Old Testament the heavenly armies are composed of angels. Possibly the saints are included as well at this point; but there is no explicit indication to that effect (but note 17:14). In any case, the assistants receive no distinct role in the battle. The achievement and the glory belong to Christ, and all the focus is appropriately on him. His weapon is the sharp sword, as in 1:16, representing his all-powerful word (see Eph. 6:17; Isa. 11:4; Heb. 4:12).

Christ rules the nations **with an iron scepter**, in fulfillment of Psalm 2:9. In Psalm 2 the rule is further defined as dashing "them to pieces like pottery." This rule is to destroy the nations is rebellion (19:18-21). The Bible as a whole, as well as Revelation, indicates that the Second Coming is for the purpose of salvation and renewal of the world (21:1-8) as well as destruction. But 19:11-21 focuses on the destructive aspects. Evil must be destroyed not only for the sake of God's justice, but for the sake of the purity of the new world (21:27).

The Battle, 19:17-21

The angelic messenger stands **in the sun**. He reflects the brightness of God's glory, and calls to mind the great theophanies of 4:1-11 and other parts of the Bible. This reflection of God's splendor is also a reminder that his message has God's authority and expresses his plan.

The angel summons birds to a horrific supper. Building on the imagery of Ezekiel 39:4, 17-20, it depicts God's curse on rebels. The curse includes not only death and utter powerlessness, but dishonoring of the bodies after death. Instead of receiving the honorable burial that the great men covet, the bodies are devoured by birds (cf. Gen. 40:19; Deut. 28:26; 1 Sam. 17:44; 2 Sam. 21:10; 1 Kings 14:11). It is the antithetical counterpart to the blessed supper of the Lamb in 19:9. On the Beast and the False Prophet, see 13:1-18. The gathering armies fill out the picture already introduce in 16:14.

The **fiery lake of burning sulfur** (v. 20) is hell, the final abode of the wicked (20:10, 14-15; 21:8; 14:1011; cf. Isa. 66:24). Fire is frequently associated with all-consuming judgment (cf. Joel 2:3; Isa. 66:15-16).

The Judgments, 20:1-21:8

The 7th cycle of judgment includes the 1000 year reign of the saints (20:1-10), and the last judgment in its negative aspect (20:11-15) and positive aspect (21:1-8).

This final cycle wraps up the course of history by dealing with several issues of justice. God vindicates the saints, giving an answer for their past suffering and martyrdom (20:4-6). He executes final judgment on Satan, the source of evil, thus eliminating the last of the three evil scourges on the world. (The Prostitute was eliminated in 17:1-19:10 and the Beast and the False Prophet were eliminated in 19:11-21.) He pronounces comprehensive judgment; no item of the past escapes his attention (20:11-15). He creates a new world free from the evils and sufferings and rebellion of the old world (21:1-8).

The 1000 Year Reign, 20:1-10

The 1000 year reign gives the promise of relief to persecuted saints.

An angel descending from heaven binds Satan for a thousand years. The faithful martyrs (20:4) come to life and reign with Christ. After the thousand years, Satan is released, gathers the nations for battle, and is finally rendered powerless (20:10).

Biblical interpreters have differed in their interpretation of the 1000 year period, commonly called the millennium. *Premillennialists* believe that the 1000 years follow the Second Coming, which has been described in 19:11-21. After the Second Coming Satan is bound and Christ ushers in a long

period of earthly peace and prosperity—some think of a literal 1000 years and others consider the number to be simply a symbol for a very long period of time. Christians receive resurrection bodies at the beginning of the millennium, but the final judgment for all others takes place at the end, after a rebellion led by Satan. In the second century A.D. Justin Martyr and Papias were among those holding a premillennial view.

Amillennialists understand the millennium to be a picture of the present reign of Christ and of the saints in heaven (analogous to 6:9-10). The first resurrection is either the life of disembodied Christians with Christ in heaven (6:9-10), or life in Christ that starts with spiritual new birth (Rom. 6:8-11; Col. 3:1-4; Eph. 2:6). Satan has been bound through the triumph of Christ in his crucifixion and resurrection (John 12:31; Col. 2:15).

Postmillennialists believe that the kingdom of Christ and the church will experience much more expansion on earth before the Second Coming. The 1000 years are understood by some as a final period of Christian earthly triumph following the spread of the gospel in 19:11-21. Other postmillennialists agree with amillennialists in identifying 20:1-6 with the entire period beginning with the resurrection of Christ.

Caution is needed because the different millennial positions depend on the interpretation of Old Testament prophetic texts as well as 20:1-10. Moreover, like most of Revelation, 20:1-10 uses language that in principle may be capable of more than one concrete embodiment. These facts make precise interpretation more difficult. The major point concerns the fact that Satan will be finally defeated, and that even before that time God takes care of his saints and gives them enjoyment of the benefits of his triumphant rule. This assurance ought to comfort us, whatever our millennial position.

The millennial dispute partly concerns the chronological relation of 20:1-10 to 19:11-21. Premillennialists believe that 20:1-10 simply follows the Second Coming, which is depicted in 19:11-21. But it makes more sense to see 20:1-15 as the last cycle of judgments, out of a total of 7, leading up to the Second Coming. Several different kinds of evidence point in this direction.

- The final battle in 20:7-10 seems to be the same as the final battle in 16:14, 16; 17:14; 19:11-21.
- Similar language from Ezekiel 38-39 is used in the various descriptions of the final battle.
- The judgment of Satan in 20:10 parallels the judgments against Babylon (17-18) and against the Beast and the False Prophet (19:11-21). These enemies of God all receive their doom, and the visions depicting their doom are thematically rather than chronologically arranged.
- Certain features in 20:11-15 correspond to earlier descriptions of the Second Coming (6:14; 11:18).
- Most important, all Christ's enemies have been destroyed in 19:11-21. If 20:1-6 were to represent events later than 19:11-21, there would be no one left for Satan to deceive in 20:3.

Thus, 20:1-15 is to be seen as a 7th cycle leading to the Second Coming. It parallels all the other cycles, rather than representing a unique period chronologically later than any of the others (see Introduction: Structure).

The mention of **the first resurrection** in 20:5, 6 is often seen as counterevidence. The argument runs as follows. The first resurrection must be bodily resurrection. If so, it follows the Second Coming and therefore places all the events of 20:1-10 subsequent to the Second Coming.

But in fact the issue is more complex. The language of the first resurrection obviously implies that there is a second. In this context, the first and second resurrections have a suggestive relation to the first and second death. The mention of **the second death** in 20:6 clearly implies a first. And we know from the general teaching of Scripture what both of these are. The first death is bodily death. The second death is consignment to hell, the final abode of the wicked (20:14-15). The second death is *spiritual* in character, and accompanies bodily resurrection (John 5:29). The first death is preliminary, while the second death is final and irreversible. It is last. As there is a first heaven and earth and a second or last (Rev. 21:1), so there is a first and last death. Moreover, the first death, in its curse character, is a sign of the coming of the more terrible second death (cf. Gen. 3:19).

These facts provide the decisive clues for understanding the first and the second resurrection. The first resurrection is preliminary, while the second resurrection is final and last. The second resurrection is clearly bodily resurrection. It is clearly the remedy for the first death, bodily death. Conversely, the first resurrection is a kind of remedy for the second death, according to 20:6. The first resurrection guarantees freedom from the second death. The various symmetries suggest that the first resurrection, like the second death, is paradoxical in character. As the second death implicitly includes and accompanies an act of bodily resurrection, so the first resurrection implicitly includes and accompanies bodily death. We find an allusion to just this bodily death in 20:4, **the souls of those who had been beheaded**. The phrase refers to those who have suffered martyrdom for not worshiping the Beast. These are now disembodied souls living in the presence of God and of Christ, as represented in 6:9-10. The important thing to see is that these souls are living, triumphant, because of their union with Christ and victory through his blood (12:11). The assertion and enjoyment of their triumph is not simply postponed until the Second Coming. They enjoy victory even at the moment of the death, for God places them in positions of authority and judgment in the heavenly realms (**thrones**, v. 4). The judges and earthly authorities who condemned them to death are already beaten by this greater authority that the saints exercise in heaven.1

The picture in 20:4-6 thus answers a very pressing and practical problem during times of intense persecution. When Christians are a tiny, powerless minority, when great imperial powers are arrayed against them, is there any hope for victory? What happens when Christians see some of their brothers and sisters put to death? It appears to worldly eyes that Christians have been decisively defeated. The world has won the battle. The persecuting governors are very much alive and as powerful as ever, while the Christians have been simply wiped out. Christianity appears to be a meaningless, hopelessly weak religion. Does God not care? Is he really in control? And what could possibly undo the defeat that Christians have suffered through their martyrdom? 20:4-6 answers that heavenly realities must be included in true reckoning. And when we see these realities, the tables are completed turned. Defeating Christians is impossible. Even when demonic forces rage and strut and do their utmost, they only succeed in establishing Christians in positions of real and permanent power!

Now let us consider some of the details. Satan is **bound**, meaning that his power to influence the nations is suppressed. Premillennialists and some postmillennialists associate this event with the

advent of an extraordinary future era of peace and prosperity, contrasting with the present (1 Thess. 2:18; 1 Pet. 5:8). But amillennial interpretation, the binding of Satan has already taken place through Christ's death and resurrection (John 12:31; cf. Col. 2:15; Rev. 12:9; Matt. 12:29). The present spread of the gospel to the nations, as initiated in Acts, is the result of a restriction on Satan's power to deceive. Possibly this restriction on Satan's power is closely associated with the present temporary demise of the Beast (17:8). The deceiving of the nations takes place largely through the activity of the Beast (13:14; 16:14; 19:20). As the Beast can suffer repeated defeats (17:8, 10), so Satan can suffer repeated defeats in his power over the nations. The loosing of Satan in 20:7-10 represents his final attempt, leading to his final defeat.

Who are **the souls** (v. 4)? As in 6:9-10, martyrs are singled out as the most notable group of faithful witnesses. But other saints are not excluded from the privileges mentioned.

The reigning of saints in verse 4 corresponds to the promise in 2:26-27 and 3:21.

What is **the first resurrection**? If this resurrection means bodily resurrection, it coincides with the Second Coming (1 Cor. 15:51-57; 1 Thess. 4:13-18). Then the premillennialists are right (see above). But the correlations between first and second death and first and second resurrection suggest that the first resurrection is a picture of the spiritual life of martyrs who reign with Christ between the time of their martyrdom and the Second Coming.

Gog and Magog are names from Ezekiel 38-39 representing the final enemies of God. Having been loosed, Satan is finally able to gather the nations to battle, as in 16:14. His desire all through history has been to muster all human beings into united opposition to God, and now he finally achieved his desire, after a fashion. But opposing God is always futile. Satan is summoning the nations only to experience his final doom.

The Judgment, 20:11-15

God appears in a scene of final judgment. God's authority to judge has already been anticipated in 4:1-5:14. Now he executes the judgment that befits his character and power over the created universe, as was earlier displayed in 4:1-11. The vision shares features with Daniel 7:9-10; Matthew 25:31-46; Psalms 7:6-8; 47:8-9; and other Old Testament judgment scenes.

Injustices and sufferings in history never escape God's eye. Those who persecute and who practice injustice can never win. God will judge every deed, all wrongs will be righted, and all attempts to dethrone God and enthrone oneself will be turned around to frustrate God's enemies completely. The prospect of final judgment ought to be a terror to God's enemies but a foundation of assurance to the saints: all evil will be frustrated and eliminated.

This judgment follows the 1000 years of 20:2, 7. Premillennialists believe that the Second Coming precedes the 1000 years, and hence must include a distinct judgment of its own. At the Second Coming Christians receive their reward, and this later judgment is for the wicked and those living in untransformed bodies during the 1000 years. Amillennialists and postmillennialists, on the other hand, have generally understood this passage as one among many references to a universal final judgment at the Second Coming (see on 20:1-10).

The throne of God symbolizes his power, his authority, and his ability to exercise righteous and thorough judgment (see 4:2).

The **sky fled**, repeating the idea in 6:14. The **book of life**, the roster of God's elect people, symbolizes that he knows his own sheep (John 10:3, 27), keeps them all, and loses none of them (John 6:39; 10:28-29; cf. Rev. 13:8). The **lake of fire**, hell, demonstrate God's consummate justice and his utter frustration of all the devices of wickedness. The new heaven and the new earth are free from all that has contaminated the world in the first order of things.

The New Heaven and the New Earth, 21:1-8

21:1-8 is usually grouped together with 21:9-22:5. The two passages present two aspects of the final vision of the new Jerusalem. 21:1-8 introduces many of the features that appear with greater elaboration in 21:9-22:5. 21:1-8 consists primarily of messages announcing the new realities, while 21:9-22:5 contains more visionary description of these realities. But 21:1-8 also has close relations to 20:11-15. The final judgment of God in fact has two sides: the negative side, the judgment of the wicked, is expressed in 20:11-15, while the positive side, the reward for the righteousness, is expressed in 21:1-8. Within the negative message of 20:11-15 one finds a final exception in the mention of the book of life (20:15). Similarly, within the positive message of 21:1-8 one finds a final exception in the mention of the fiery lake (21:8). Thus 20:11-15 and 21:1-8 form two symmetric tableaux depicting judgment in both negative and positive sides. 21:1-8 is thus a bridge between the judgment of 20:11-15 and the extended description of the new Jerusalem in 21:9-22:5.

The voice of God announces the descent of the new Jerusalem, against the backdrop of total renovation: a new heaven and a new earth. God is the Alpha (see 1:8), the Creator, whose purposes were expressed in creation from the beginning. Now he shows himself to be the Omega, the Consummator, who brings his purposes to final realization. The throne vision of 4:1-11 displayed God's glory, power, and beauty within the fundamental sphere of heaven. Now the dwelling of God extends to all his people (21:3). All evil and pain is abolished, in contrast to the pain, suffering, and struggles running through the earlier parts of Revelation. The promises made to overcomers are now fulfilled (see 2:7).

This vision is meant to encourage faithfulness, confidence, and hope in Christians, especially those who face persecution. God will achieve his full purpose, and Christians will inherit his full blessing, however grim the circumstances may temporarily look. Though this vision pertains to the consummation of all things, in Christ we even now receive the down-payment of our future inheritance (Eph. 1:14; Heb. 12:18-29). Hence Christians may receive a foretaste now of that final bliss. God's promises should stimulate our fervent devotion to Christ.

The final visions of Revelation weave into a beautiful unity a host of themes from the rest of the Bible. Note the theme of creation (v. 1); the holy city of Jerusalem (v. 2); communion with God expressed through marriage imagery (v. 2); dwelling of God, including tabernacle and temple (v. 3; see on 4:1-5:14); saints as God's own people (v. 3); the end of suffering and death (v. 4); new deeds of salvation (v. 5); trustworthiness of God's word (v. 5); living water (v. 6); becoming a son of God (v. 7); warnings to the faithless (v. 8); judgment (v. 8).

God creates **a new heaven and a new earth**, implying comprehensive renovation. Some have thought that the new universe will be an entirely new world with no connection with the old. But Isaiah 65:17-25 and Romans 8:21-23 indicate that a transfiguration of the old world is in view, like the way in which our new bodies will be transfigurations of the old (1 Cor. 15:35-57). Everything is new (21:5), which indicates the thoroughness and extent of transfiguration; but the result is redemption and not mere abolition of the old. Some people are prone to worry about the loss of things from this life. Indeed, we must be prepared to give up everything for the sake of loyalty to Christ (Luke 9:23-26; 14:25-35; John 12:24-26). But in the process we will find that nothing of genuine value or beauty is permanently lost. After all, God in his beauty and majesty is the source for all beauty and joy that we have as creatures. Living in the presence of God in the new world (Rev. 21:3; 22:4-5) means bathing in the source of the river, in comparison with which the joys of earth are but a few drops of muddied water. We do not know the details of what God will do and how he will do it. But we know that his presence is consummate joy (19:9). We will have no regrets or unsatisfiable longings (21:4).

Why is there no **sea**? The description here is symbolic. We will not lose the beauty and awe that modern people associate with the sea and its creatures. Rather, we lose the ancient biblical symbolic associations of the sea with evil and chaos. Water destroys the world in the time of Noah. Overwhelming waters picture the coming of death (Pss. 42:7; 69:1; Jonah 2:3). From the water rise terrible monsters (Dan. 7:3; Isa. 27:1; 51:9-10; Rev. 13:1). The removal of the sea means the absolute and permanent removal of all challenges to God's order, and hence the peace and stability of the new world.

At the center of the new creation is the new holy city, representing the dwelling of God with human beings. In the Old Testament Jerusalem was the place where the Lord God put his name and where he established his dwelling place (Deut. 12:5, 11; 1 Kings 8:16, 29). God establishes a place where not only individuals but the whole nation can have access to him, can obtain forgiveness, and can bring their prayers and their offerings. The temple and the surrounding city are consecrated for the presence of God, to be the way of access to God. In Christ this access to God is fulfilled. He is the "one mediator between God and men" (1 Tim. 2:5). The whole international community of saints has access even now to the heavenly assembly (Heb. 12:18-29). The new Jerusalem represents the perfecting of the community and the consummation of its joy in the presence of God. This consummation is fundamentally the work of God, not human beings. It is not Babel reaching up to assault heaven in autonomous pride, but the new Jerusalem **coming down out of heaven** as the gift and artistic product of God's craft.

The imagery then shifts from city to bride (v. 2), further personalizing the picture and stressing the intimacy, love, and pleasure of communion with God (cf. 19:7-9; Eph. 5:22-33; Song of Solomon).

God dwelt with human beings in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:7, 16; 3:8), in the tabernacle (Exod. 25:8; 40:34), in the temple (1 Kings 8), and climactically in Christ (John 1:14; 2:19-21). Christ sends the Spirit in order that the church (1 Cor. 3:16) and its members (1 Cor. 6:19) may be dwellings of God. The new Jerusalem is the consummation of all of these. God will **be their God**, implying that he will be a faithful and loving supplier of all needs, with unimaginable fullness. All the commitments and promises of God through earlier history find the apex of their fulfillment. Positively, there is consummate blessing; negatively, all aspects of suffering and frustration are

completely removed (v. 4). God himself guarantees the certainty and the effectiveness of this result (v. 5), on the basis of his own sovereignty and competence as Creator (v. 6). Full satisfaction is pictured through the image of the water of life (v. 6). A whole cluster of passages associate living water with the Holy Spirit first of all, and then subordinately the blessings that the Holy Spirit brings (22:1, 7; 17; John 4:10; 7:37-38; Isa. 44:3; 55:1; Zech. 14:8; Joel 3:18; Ezek. 47).

Both as warning and as guarantee, verse 8 notes that the wicked will be excluded from the new Jerusalem. This exclusion summarizes the point already made in 20:11-15. The standard of God's justice as well as the holiness and the peace of the new Jerusalem require the exclusion of evil. No sin or second fall into evil will disturb the permanent security and bliss of the new world.

The New Jerusalem, 21:9-22:5

The picture of the new Jerusalem is now unfolded in detail. The final dwelling place of the saints is simultaneously the fulfillment of earlier revelations of (a) God appearing in glory and reigning in his heavenly court (compare 22:1, 3; and 21:22-23 with 4:1-11); (b) the holy city Jerusalem (21:10); (c) the Garden of Eden (22:1-3); (d) the bride, the marriage partner of the Lord (21:9); (e) the temple as dwelling place of God (21:22, 3). The central figure and the central blessing of the city is God himself and the Lamb (21:22-23; 22:1-5). The final revelation of God necessarily brings to a climax all earlier revelations. It completes God's purpose of bringing all things under one head, even Christ (11:15; Eph. 1:10). Thus it harmonizes with the creation of all things by Christ at the beginning (4:11; 1:17; Col. 1:15-17) and the redemption of all things through Christ in the middle (5:9-14; Col. 1:18-20; Rom. 11:36). Because of the fluid character of the imagery, it is wisest not to distinguish rigidly between the inhabitants of the city (the saints) and the city itself (saints together with glorified creation).

The Architecture of the New Jerusalem, 21:9-27

As in 21:2, the new city is also the bride. We enjoy personal intimacy and joy in the presence of God (bride), and structural organization with other saints into a harmonious worldwide community (city).

The mention of being **in the Spiri**t reiterates 1:10; 4:1; and 17:3. The Spirit transports John to a new vantage point for this final vision, underlining its importance. The mountain location reminds us of God's special meeting-place with human beings, alluding to 14:1; Exodus 15:17; 19:1-25; Psalms 48:1-2; 68:15-16; Ezekiel 28:14; Micah 4:1-2; and other passages.

The fundamental character of the city is that it shines with **the glory of God** (v. 11). Closely associated with the imagery of light, glory indicates the majesty, awesomeness, and beauty of God. Glory is a prominent theme in 21:9-22:5. It is associated with the temple and the appearing of God in the Old Testament (21:22-23; 22:5; 15:8; Exod. 16:10; 24:16-17; 40:34-35; Isa. 6:3; 40:3; 60:1-2, 19-20; Hab. 2:14; Zech. 2:5; John 1:14). God's heavenly splendor as seen in 4:1-11 now fills the new world.

In ancient cities gates and walls served for protection. Because of the abolition of all evil (vv. 4, 8), the city has no need of protection in a literal sense. But the imagery remains, to remind us of the full security and architectural wisdom of the whole (cf. Ezek. 40). The use of the number 12 also has symbolic significance. The twelve tribes of Israel formed the holy people of God in the Old

Testament. The church under the teaching and leadership of the twelve apostles forms the holy people of God in the New Testament. The integrity and careful organization of the people is stressed by the use of the number 12. The foundation is the twelve apostles, as they in their teaching and leading functions point us to Christ (Eph. 2:20; 3:5; 4:11; 1 Cor. 12:28; 1 Cor. 3:11!).

The process of measurement, as in Ezekiel 40-41 and Revelation 11:1-2, symbolizes the commitment to preserve the whole, not only in memory but in actual structural integrity. The dimensions supplied have symbolic significance. Each side is 12,000 stadia. The number 12 symbolizes the people of God, of which this city is the dwelling place. The 1000 multiplies the dimensions so that the city is absolutely huge: about 1400 miles on a side. The immense size symbolizes the immensity and profundity of God's purposes that will be realized. There is no lack of space or lack of supplies for the new world. Note also that the city is in the shape of a perfect cube: all three dimensions are the same. The shape is the same as the most holy place in the tabernacle and the temple, but now immensely magnified. Thus the whole city is not only architecturally perfect, but has become the most intimate dwelling place of God (21:22-23; 22:4).

The wall is **144 cubits** (v. 17). 144 = 12 X 12. All the dimensions of the city symbolize its associations with the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles (21:12, 14). 12 symbolically designates the people of God.

There now follows a list of jewels and precious things, expressing the overwhelming riches and beauty and light-filled splendor of the whole city. This city has thus become in its whole and in every part a reflection of the riches and beauty and splendor of God, as earlier revealed in 4:1-11. The list of jewels corresponds roughly to the twelve precious stones of Aaron's breastpiece (Exod. 28:15-21). The prerogatives that once belonged exclusively to the high priest are now reflected in the entire city.

There is no temple, because God is present in his full immediacy in the whole city. See on 4:1-5:14. The brightness supplied directly from God is such that it makes superfluous the heavenly bodies, **the sun and the moon** that up to this time have represented as a dim reflection the originary splendor of God. The magnified sense of light fulfills Isaiah 60:19-20.

The nations (v. 24) represent redeemed humanity in all its cultural divisions. The distinctiveness of different cultures and peoples is not simply wiped out, but redeemed, in harmony with the picture in 1 Corinthians 12 of the unity and diversity in the body of Christ. (See Isa. 60:3-12 and Rev. 5:9.) The nations bring in their **splendor**, all the diversity of riches both material and intellectual and artistic and spiritual, as in Isaiah 60:3-5; Haggai 2:7-9.

Ancient city gates needed to be shut in case of attack. These gates need never be shut, in fulfillment of Isaiah 60:11.

As in 20:11-15 and 21:8, all uncleanness and corruption is excluded (v. 27). On the book of life, see 13:8.

The New Jerusalem as New Edenic Garden, 22:1-5

The final paradisiacal description contains many elements alluding to the Garden of Eden. The intimacy of God with his people (22:3-4) and the abundance of his blessing (22:1-2, 5) are stressed

even more than in the preceding verses. The final state restores the unbroken, idyllic communion between God and human beings. But the apex of history is ever so much more magnificent than the beginning. The garden is now also a city, and the light has driven out all night.

Revelation is designed not only to inform us and assure us about God's final purposes, but to increase our longing for God and the realization of his purpose. The sureness of that final bliss comforts saints during times of temptation and persecution. It purifies our desires by directing them to God and his glory. And then the tawdry counterfeits of this world are seen to be what they are. We have eyes to see the beauties and joys of this creation as pointers to God and his goodness (Acts 14:17), rather than foolishly perverting created things into idols to which we offer our ultimate allegiance (Rom. 1:18-23).

The center of the new world is God himself, and the Lamb. Their rule and control, symbolized by the throne, produce the beauty and blessing of the new world. Abundant supply of life-giving water comes from God. In the picture of the river Revelation weaves together allusions to Genesis 2:10-14; Psalm 46:4; Ezekiel 47:1-12; Joel 3:18; and John 4:10-14; 7:37-39. The brightness of the river (**clear as crystal**) reflects the glory of God (21:11, 23). The tree of life is present, renewing the blessing of Eden in Genesis 2:9. Access to God's life-giving blessings, barred after the fall, is here renewed (Gen. 3:22-24; Ezek. 47:12; Rev. 2:7; 22:14, 19). It is not clear how many trees there are (cf. Ezek. 47:12), but in the symbolic mode of Revelation this detail is not important. The point is that Eden is back, with its fullness of blessing multiplied many times.

The leaves are **for the healing of the nations** (v. 2). The new world has already been described as free from all problems and suffering (21:4). So how can the nations need healing? But in fact we are not intended to read the passage so unimaginatively as to infer a literal presence of sickness. A visionary passage like this one weaves together symbolic themes rather than being pedantically precise about all possible implications. The language reflects Ezekiel 47:12, but extends the healing not just to Israel but to all nations, in fulfillment of the international promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:3). The new creation as a whole answers all our needs and produces a consummate remedy for all the ills that belonged to the old (21:4).

The theme of returning to Eden continues with the reversal of curse (v. 3), which answers Genesis 3:14-19. God now exercises his rule entirely in blessing. At the heart of this blessing stands communion with God himself: to see his face (v. 4). Creaturely knowledge of God never exhausts the infinity of God's being. But this final knowledge brings the apex of intimacy and enjoyment. At that point we experience perfect holiness and no more sin, and so human beings can enjoy a vision of God such as was not possible while they were contaminated with sin (Exod. 19:21; 33:20; Judges 13:22; Isa. 6:5; John 1:18).

Light is a symbol of ethical purity, and is closely associated with God (1 John 1:5-7; 2:8-11; John 1:4; 3:19-21). It is fitting, therefore, that the final symbolic vision is characterized by pervasive light, with no darkness (Rev. 22:5). All evil is gone, and the splendor and brightness of God's presence fills the entire universe.

Closing Exhortations, 22:6-21

The central visionary part of Revelation ends with 22:5. Revelation now concludes with promise, exhortation, and confirmation in order to drive home to our hearts the message of the visions, and to stir up hope for the coming of the Lord Jesus (22:20). The major themes of Revelation continue to be woven into this concluding section. There are many allusions back to Revelation 1.

The words are **trustworthy and true**, echoing 1:2. The theme of witness runs through the entirety of Revelation. Christ is the preeminent witness (1:5), John communicates this witness through the content of Revelation (1:2-3), and the saints take up the task of witness in the face of opposition (2:10, 13; 11:3-12).

Jesus promises to come **soon** (v. 7). As in 1:1, the shortness of the time is from the standpoint of Old Testament prophecy, especially Daniel. Daniel prophesied about things that were far distant in time. John prophesies about things that are even now in the process of realization, since the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. Saints are always to be watchful, not knowing when the Lord will come (Mark 13:32-37; Luke 12:35-48; 17:20-37). Blessed are those who are awake and watchful, and blessed likewise are the people who take to heart the prophecy of Revelation, which calls us to this same watchfulness and faithfulness to the Master.

The temptation to worship the assisting angel repeats 19:10.

The instruction not to seal up the book (v. 10) underlines the nearness of fulfillment. By contrast with Revelation, Daniel's scroll was sealed because the time of fulfillment was distant (Dan. 12:4).

Verse 11 exhorts us to perseverance in doing right. Under persecution, oppression, and discouragement, saints are tempted to lose heart and compromise. The call to persevere in the faith is always apt (cf. Heb. 10:35-39; 3:6; etc.). But how do we understand the negative pronouncements about doing wrong? The working out of history polarizes good and evil. If people do not repent when they hear the word of God, it increases their hardness. If hearing Revelation does not change one's course of life completely, it fixes one more firmly to one's present course, whichever side of the battle that may be. (See Dan. 12:10; Ezek. 3:27; 2 Cor 2:15-16.)

On coming **soon**, see 1:1 and 22:7. God distributes rewards and punishments according to what people have done, as in 20:12. The saints are saved by the grace of God in the work of Christ (19:8; 5:9-10; 13:8; cf. Eph. 2:1-10). But they are not saved in order to continue in sin (Rev. 2:4; 3:3-4; 14:4-5). Even during this life the saints begin to live a holy life, and God is pleased to reward them for their works (2:7, 11, 17, 23-26; 3:3-5, 12, 21; 19:8). The imperfections in these works, and the remaining contaminations from sinful inclinations, are covered by the blood of Christ. Good works are not the basis for eternal life, as if we earned life through our own efforts; but they are external demonstrations of the genuineness of our faith and of the justice of God's judgment (1 Pet. 1:7; 2 Thess. 1:5). The separation between the righteous and the wicked in 22:14-15 distinguishes people with two antithetical kinds of character and behavior (cf. Matt. 25:31-46). (On the Alpha and the Omega in verse 13), see 1:8.)

The time of consummation has not yet come. But it will come. Revelation by picturing the final triumph of God and the splendors to follow stirs up the longing for that final day. **The Spirit** leads the church in prayer, "**Come!**" Come, Lord Jesus (22:20). **The bride**, that is, the church (19:7; Eph. 5:22-33), takes up the prayer and longing, as she is taught by the Spirit (cf. Rom. 8:15-16).

Revelation continues with an address to the thirsty: "Whoever is thirsty, let him come; ..." (v. 17). On this basis some interpreters have seen all the occurrences of "come" as addressed to thirsty human beings. But the atmosphere of anticipating the Second Coming makes it more probable that the first two occurrences are addressed to Christ, in longing for his Coming. The invitation to the thirsty is then a surprise twist. But it harmonizes with urgency of the nearness of the Second Coming, as this nearness is underlined by the first two occurrences of "come." The door is open for repentance. The invitation extends both to those who already trust in Christ and to those who are still in rebellion. Come while there is still time, before He comes.

God's word is holy; it is distinguished from all merely human words. No mere human authority is authorized to add to or subtract from the word of God (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:6; cf. Eccles. 3:14). Revelation underlines its character as the word of God by explicitly prohibiting tampering. God's word is sure, and needs no "updating" or supposed "improvements." Jezebel and the false teachers mentioned in 2:14-15, 2:20 claimed to be Christians but distorted the truth. Such tampering remains a real possibility throughout church history. It may take the form of claims to special visions, as is shown by the production in later centuries of supposed revelations: Apocalypse of Peter, Apocalypse of Paul, and Apocalypse of Thomas. Claims for supposed visions and angelic revelations have continued to crop up until the present time (Emanuel Swedenborg, Joseph Smith). In addition, teachers who do not claim to have special visions may distort the truth. Like Jezebel, they may give plausible arguments trying to convince Christians that they can compromise with the ways of the world in order to avoid persecution.2 (On **the tree of life**, see 22:2.)

Come, Lord Jesus. The whole of Revelation is meant to stir our longing and prayers for the full realization of God's purposes, which is to take place at the Second Coming. Revelation fittingly ends on this note. See 1 Cor. 16:22.

1 I am indebted to Meredith G. Kline, "The First Resurrection," Westminster Theological Journal 37/2 (1974-75) 366-375, for this line of interpretation.

2 See Beale, Revelation, 1151-53.